

One Step Forward

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One Step Forward

by [Adriana in the Snow](#)

Summary

The first strike hit harder than most could hit, and it made Technoblade's arms sting, though he managed to stumble back into the wall and keep ahold of his weapon. He swung at the figure, but the opponent was far too fast and precise. It blocked the hit with ease, and a hand clamped down around his wrist. He was yanked forward and forced off balance. His wrist stung as it was twisted, and his sword dropped to the ground. He gave a pained yelp as he ended up on his knees. Sharp familiar metal touched his throat, and he could taste death on his tongue.

But it didn't come.

This is a collection of one-shots that give a little bit of backstory for Phil and Technoblade in my story One More Step Out of the Pit. I'd suggest you read that one first, especially because chapter 1 spoils a bit of the mystery there.

Notes

Just a quick tip about this particular story. It and Like Footprints on the Seashore (the next fic in this series) were published at the same time. You can choose to read this from beginning to end and then move on to Footsteps, but if you want to read them together as intended, you should read two chapters from this fic and then one from Footsteps. Repeat until the end.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Counting

He was given a name after he'd killed 20 in the ring. The first 5 had been during the pre-show acts where kids under 10 were tossed into the ring to fend for themselves against the adult fighters. He knew he must have been six because starting at five the children were allowed to choose weapons to take into the ring plus one extra for every year of age. There had actually been instances of 10-year-olds winning a fight since their opponents went in bare handed. He knew no six-year-olds had ever won because of how they'd made such a spectacle at the fact that he did even the first time. The house had been happy. No one had bet on him winning. No one had bet on more than 5 minutes. A couple had decided to bet on him the next time he was tossed into the ring and a couple joined them for the third. By the end of the 5th fight, the owners decided they probably shouldn't keep him as a pre-show anymore.

That decision finally came with the chance to breathe, not for long, but for longer. The first 5 fights had been over the course of 2 day. Two the first day and three the second. To an outsider these fights lasted less than 10 minutes, but to him they lasted for days.

See, there was a reason no six-year-olds ever survived to the end of fights in the ring. They were too small. They had no training. They didn't have the instinct to kill necessary for a fight to the death. He was no different and he died at the first one's hands within seconds. But what his opponent didn't know, what the crowds and ring leader and the owners of the ring didn't know was that he didn't die. At least not for real.

He'd died within seconds, but then the seconds rolled back. He dodged the blow that killed him the first time but didn't manage to dodge the second. He wasn't sure how long it took for him to figure out what was happening. He had never had cause to use his power before. He had not known at the time anyone could use powers down here in the Pit. After all, that was the point. Yet, he would find, his power transcended the one that took all of the others away. He did not know that at the time of course. All he'd known was dying hurt, so he did his best to avoid it.

There was not much avoiding it in the ring as it would turn out. He inched forward second by second going back and forth and back and forth until he saw an opening and sent the knife he'd been allowed into the opponent's vulnerable side. He'd still died after that, but the next time, he'd rammed the almost useless metal shield into his opponent's side and then slid the knife across his throat when he stumbled.

After the first 5 killings, he was promoted to being an actual part of the show and not cannon fodder used to get the blood flowing. These fights were scheduled more sporadically, and he found himself with time to heal and breathe with a two day break between each fight and never more than one a night. By the time he stole the sword from his 20th opponent and ran him through with it, he was already becoming a main event.

They named him Technoblade, so they could put it on the signs.

From there life was numbers. 722, 560, 671, 107, 209, 182, 52, 54, 27, 10, 18, 5. Faces didn't matter. Names didn't matter. But he did count. The total number before each fight was over slowly started going down as he learned how to fight for real.

They said he was turning 14 one time when they threw him into the ring with yet another opponent. That number meant something to them apparently, though it did not to him. The opponent was let into

the arena, or more, shoved.

0.

He looked at it and it looked back at him.

0.

It was small and didn't have a weapon.

0.

He looked up at the ring leader in confusion.

0.

“Kill,” said the ring leader and the crowd and the handler behind him. He did not understand.

0.

“Kill,” was still being chanted and he looked at his opponent and he understood.

0.

When he still did not move to plunge his blade into its chest like the crowd was expecting, he was shoved.

0.

The handler was screaming at him, smacking him. Eventually when he didn't head him...

He turned his attention to his handler.

1.

The handler only got to 1. He wasn't a fighter.

More people came then who racked up higher numbers and he did what he always did. He went back. He corrected. He won.

Without quite realizing how, but only fleeing from the things that led to death, he ended up not in the ring or the arena at all. Then he was on a street. He knew the word for street, but it had been so long, longer than it actually had been that the memories were fuzzy.

Yet, there was still not time for rest. He had a tracker on him, of course.

He went away, away, away from the arena as the opponents pushed him further. He lasted longer the farther away he got. He ended up at the barrier: the shuddering black and red net like pulses of magic that kept the people down here down here. He did not know what was on the other side of it but going closer meant lasting longer. Getting closer filled his head with things, but his head was always filled with things with mistakes and corrections: up, down, dodge, slash. The opponents going after him could not get as close to the barrier as he could. So, he got closer. He died to the barrier 76 times before he found a weak spot in the way the magic ebbed and flowed and barreled through it.

Death stopped and let him catch his breath.

For a while.

But the new world he stepped out into was confusing and death as always would find him soon enough. It started with a man with a knife in an alley.

1.

He wasn't a good fighter. He'd stumbled around so much Technoblade just had to step to the side and rip the knife out of his hand to be done.

There were a few more over the next few weeks.

1.

2.

1.

1.

4.

Someone saw him attack the opponent before it drew the gun. Saw Technoblade tear out the opponent's throat seemingly without prompting.

He found then he was running once again.

There was more death then, a few still unpracticed and shaky.

1.

2.

1.

1.

3.

But some that were not.

10.

20.

18.

14.

Then, some that were special. There were ones who could do things Technoblade had never witnessed in the ring.

Ones that breathed fire.

109.

Ones that stole air from his lungs.

207.

Ones that moved so fast he didn't even realize he was being attacked until over 20 deaths.

1121.

They got better and better and better and more frequent and he didn't *understand*.

He'd been backed into an alley by the next one and was dreading fighting his way out. He huffed in breaths as fast as he could, stumbling farther down the alley in a bid to catch his breath just a bit before the fight began. He had been running from the noisemakers on the cars (He thinks they call them cars. There hadn't been any in the Pit.) but they had faded slightly into the distance.

He'd thought it was maybe a break, but he was wrong because now there was another one. The newest opponent was on Technoblade quicker than he'd have liked. He could tell the moment the opponent's sword clashed with his that this would be many, many deaths. The first strike hit harder than most could hit, and it made Technoblade's arms sting, though he managed to stumble back into the wall and keep ahold of his weapon. He swung at the figure, but the opponent was far too fast and precise. It blocked the hit with ease, and a hand clamped down around his wrist. He was yanked forward and forced off balance. His wrist stung as it was twisted, and his sword dropped to the ground. He gave a pained yelp as he ended up on his knees. Sharp familiar metal touched his throat, and he could taste death on his tongue.

But it didn't come. He had closed his eyes to wait but opened them again to look up.

0.

The number hadn't changed yet. There was still a sword at his throat, but it hadn't cut him.

0.

Their eyes met. Technoblade was confused. He could hear the noisemaker cars in the distance.

0.

The blade stayed at his throat as the opponent moved in closer. The hand not holding the sword came out cautiously and Technoblade felt something encircle his wrist.

0.

He let the second hand pull his arm with the thing encircling it until the other side of the restraint could click around his other wrist. Technoblade blinked at it, confused, but it didn't matter since as soon as the blade against his throat cut, he'd be unbound again. But...

0.

The blade was lowered slowly away from his neck. Eyes were watching him with caution, but Technoblade just blinked, unsure what was going on.

0.

Arms were wrapping around him, and Technoblade could feel the strength in them, the potential for death in them, but he was not crushed, simply lifted.

0.

His arms, despite already being restrained in one way and his legs were tucked in close so they couldn't move anywhere. Technoblade tested the grip out of curiosity more than a desire to escape. He had already lost. He was just waiting for the counter to click up. He found the grip was firm, firmer than the iron around his wrists even, but to his surprise it also brought no pain. He looked up into the eyes of the one who had him ensnared. Wings unfolded a few inches from Technoblade's face.

0.

They ended up in the air then, wind whipping through Technoblade messily sheared white hair, and Technoblade was confused.

0.

And the number of times Phil would be the reason Technoblade used his powers would remain at 0 for the next 6 years, and even then, the circumstances were very different.

Brown, Yellow, Green, Red, Orange, and Blue

Chapter Summary

There are 6 colors in a standard package of M&Ms.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil's head hadn't stopped throbbing in a week. He'd go to a doctor if he couldn't pinpoint the exact reason for the headache starting and persisting. It had started about 5 minutes after he'd dropped off the 'Blood God' (as he'd been named by the press) in a cell.

He'd spent most of his time since then in meetings and press conferences being bombarded with questions that basically boiled down to 'How did you manage to catch him, Phil?' 'Why isn't he dead, Phil?' 'What the hell are we going to do with him now, Phil?'

Phil's answers were always the same no matter how subtly the questions were phrased. 'I literally just fought him.' 'I was able to beat him without needing deadly force, so I didn't use it.' 'I don't know. Do whatever you usually do with people when I arrest them. Put him on trial. Why are you asking me?'

The media at least seemed to accept his words, but the higher ups were not happy with his explanations. Ironically, despite being the one to stop the bloody massacre that had ripped through the streets, those in charge were not particularly happy with Phil right now and they made it known without ever actually saying it explicitly. If they'd wanted nothing more than a corpse at the end of the manhunt, then they should have fucking said so.

He'd just gotten out of another meeting with someone and someone else very, very important after almost two hours. There was nothing else to do today. He wasn't on rotation, but he also wasn't allowed to go home yet. It was migraine inducing.

Hoping that maybe sugar and caffeine could make his head feel a bit better, he wandered over to the vending machines. Yet, he only had time to push the buttons for one bag of candy before being interrupted.

"Hey Phil," a voice said, and Phil winced even though it was just Puffy, and she probably wasn't here to subtly berate him. He just needed 5 minutes to himself, was that really too much to ask?

Still, he turned his head and shot her a strained smile. "Hey, Puffy," he greeted. She was holding a box under one arm and had a stack of folders in the other. He could see by the way she was subtly shifting her weight from left to right that she wanted something from him. He held back a sigh. "Do you need something?"

"Yes," she said. "I do."

He grabbed the bag of M&Ms that had just been dispensed and shoved them in his coat pocket. Then, he turned to face her fully. "What?"

“Well,” she said after a moment. “I’ve been assigned to talk to... *him*. I already have twice and didn’t get anywhere. Neither has anyone else, and I was just wondering, since you’re the one who brought him in if... you have any insight at all.”

“Insight?” Phil asked with a frown.

“Just...” she said. She clearly didn’t even know what she was asking for. “Anything. Any observations about him. How did he act when you were fighting? Did he say anything? What did he do when he lost? Anything.”

“I...” Phil said, thinking back. “He didn’t say anything. He retreated down an alley. We fought.” It was over in a flash. Phil hadn’t had time to think. He’d just let instinct and years of sword training he was surprised he hadn’t forgotten since he hadn’t willingly touched one in 8 years take over. The next thing he’d known, he’d won. “As soon as I disarmed him, he didn’t resist.” He’d been docile, covered in blood and grime, but passive when Phil had handcuffed him and picked him up. “There isn’t much to tell.” There had been terror in his eyes, but also resignation. He’d seemed confused when Phil didn’t slit his throat.

She sighed, biting her bottom lip. “Well, if you think of anything else that could be helpful with getting him to talk, that’d be appreciated.”

“Sure,” Phil said. “Sorry, I can’t be more help.” He tilted his head at her. “Can I ask why you’re the one interrogating him?”

“I’m the only one with psych training who is willing to talk to him at this point.”

“I would have expected them to send in a mind reader, not a psychiatrist,” Phil mused. Phil didn’t exactly support using mind readers on prisoners. It felt wrong, but he knew that it was a common practice, and this case would be a prime candidate for it.

Puffy grimaced. “They uh,” she said. “They did.”

Phil blinked at her tone. “What? Then why...?”

Wordlessly, she opened one of the folders she was carrying and pulled out a piece of notebook paper. She handed it to him, and he looked down at it in confusion.

The neat handwriting contrasted ironically with its formless contents. *White. Arm. Left. Stick. Down. Down. 0. Click. Up. Tilt. ‘Hello. Can you tell me your name?’ Tap. Tap. Click. Down. 0. Frown. 0. 0. ‘My name is Eret. Do you know why you’re here?’ Frown. Point. ‘Eret.’ Point. Frown. 0. ‘Can you understand me?’ Click. 0. Click. Death. Back. ‘I think that’s enough for today.’*

“What is this?” Phil asked when he’d finished reading it.

“That’s every thought the mind reader got off of him written in real time. You can watch back the tape if you’d like. Every thought was just narrating how the mind reader was moving except for the number 0 and...” Death. “More experienced mind readers were sent in after that as well. It was all the same.”

“What does it mean?” Phil asked.

“I’m not sure. I would usually think some sort of mind reading diversion. I think a lot of people do think that, but it’s... something’s off, Phil. I’ve been watching him when I’m in and out of the room,

and I honestly don't think he's faking. That's why I wanted to talk to you. I thought maybe you'd possibly know something. Maybe he acted different with you."

"How's he acting now?" Phil asked.

She studied him for a moment. "Would you like to come see? You can watch when I talk to him if you'd like."

He probably shouldn't. There was no reason for him to do so really. He'd brought him in. His job was finished. Yet, curiosity (and the image of sad, scared eyes burned into his retinas) pulled at him.

"Sure," he answered.

She seemed happy that he was willing to come, and shuffled the transcribed mindreading session back into her files before quickly leading him towards the interrogation rooms. There were many more guards than usual outside the room despite the power neutralizing cuffs the Blood God was doubtlessly wearing, Phil noted. He recognized most of them and the ones he did smiled at him, though most of the smiles were a bit strained.

Phil ducked into the observation room adjacent to the interrogation room. The Blood God already had been moved from his cell into the interrogation room and Phil could see him through the one-way mirror. He was restrained to the table by both wrists and ankles, though they'd given him about half a foot of slack in the wrist restraints. He was staring blankly at the wall across from him which was about a foot to the left of where Phil was standing now. His expression did not change as the door opened.

"Hello again," Puffy said as she entered the room. He turned his head to have her in his sights but did not react to the greeting. "I brought something for you today." Still no reaction. His eyes just followed her as she approached the table and set the box down on the edge. She settled the files down in front of her seat and then reached into the box to pull out half a dozen crayons and a couple of blank pieces of paper. "It seems you don't like to speak much, huh?" she asked. "Or maybe that you can't, so I was thinking maybe you would want to write or draw to communicate." There was no sign that he'd even registered anything she'd said. "It doesn't have to be about anything in particular! It can be about whatever you want it to be."

His face reminded Phil of his computer screen saver when he left it alone for too long. He could almost see the little blue ball that would endlessly travel across the screen until it hit one of the sides, bounce off at an angle, and hit another side a few moments later.

Puffy smiled awkwardly, but earnestly and took one of the pieces of paper for herself as well as the green and blue crayons. She drew for a few minutes in silence, trying and failing to not seem bothered by the lack of response. The Blood God's eyes watched her movements, but otherwise he did not move or emote at all. Once finished, she turned the page so he could see it. "I drew Earth," she said. "Would you like to try?"

His eyes flickered to the page and then back to her face. He did not move to grab a crayon.

She waited for about a minute with the picture held on display before slowly putting it down. "That's okay," she said. "We can try again tomorrow. How about that?"

Of course, there was no answer to her question. She put her picture and the rest of the art supplies back in the box and gathered everything up before turning to leave. Phil continued to watch hoping to see some sign of life in the time it took her to leave the interrogation room and come to meet him in the observation room. There was none.

"You see why I don't think he's just being stubborn," Puffy offered. Yes, Phil agreed in his head. Something else was going on here. Something was wrong. "Some other people yelled at him before me. I think that just made it worse. I honestly think he's been dissociating since he's been here. At least since the first time I saw him."

Phil stared into the room for a few more moments. "Are we sure?" Phil asked. It had been a question on his mind since the alleyway, but he had never dared voice it because the question didn't make sense.

"Are we sure of what?"

"Are we sure he's the person we were trying to catch?"

Puffy blinked over at him, but she wasn't immediately judging like Phil knew most people would be if he'd dared voice that inquiry. "Yes," she said. "You were the one who brought him in covered in blood, Phil. There is video evidence of him doing it. This is definitely the right person."

"It's just... He barely fought me, Puffy," he divulged. He'd said it to many people over the past few days, but he didn't think any of them really got it. No one understood what he was saying. "I saw the videos. He was so fast and precise like he was anticipating every move the people he fought would make, but he wasn't like that with me. He wasn't like that when I caught him." He pointed to the emotionless figure behind the glass. "He wasn't like this when I caught him either. He was..." He wasn't sure what to say. Afraid? Weak? Sad? He'd seemed dead on his feet, but not dead in his eyes. Phil wasn't sure how to explain it, but they'd met eyes, and Phil had seen something. He wasn't sure what that something was, but it had given him pause then and it pushed him forward now. "Can I try?" he asked without meaning to.

"To talk to him?" she asked, startled. Phil nodded. She hesitated, her eyes traveling to the still figure behind the glass, but then nodded slowly. "Sure, if you'd like."

"I would," he confirmed. She nodded and after a brief discussion with the posted guards, Phil was standing at the door to the interrogation room. Phil took a breath and opened the door.

The Blood God's head turned to look at him just as it had when Puffy had entered the room, but when his eyes landed on Phil, recognition flared. He straightened a minute amount in his chair.

"Hey, mate," Phil said softly. He didn't return the greeting, but he did seem to actually be half focusing on Phil which was more than how he'd been with Puffy.

Tension entered his frame the moment Phil took a step closer to the table. Phil paused. That was new too. After a moment of hesitating, Phil continued his path to the table. Eyes tracked his every movement like a cornered prey animal even after he'd settled down into the chair across from him. They stared at each other for a long moment. Phil scrambled for something to say or do; he wasn't even sure why he was here. What was he doing here?

The figure in front of him seemed to have the same question considering the way he tilted his head almost immeasurably to the side. He was confused, leery, and scared.

He didn't look like a 'Blood God.' He didn't look like a murderer. He looked like a child.

Phil fumbled for his coat pocket, and instantly realized he should have gone about the movement in a calmer manner by the way the boy shrunk back at the motion, but by the time he realized the action

was a mistake, he'd already drawn the small brown bag out of his pocket. "Uh," he said awkwardly, shaking the small bag. "Do you want some M&Ms?"

He stared at Phil, eyes wide. His wrists were pulling tight against the restraints as he tried to put as much distance as possible between him and Phil. His eyes flashed to Phil's hands like he expected them to contain a knife rather than candy.

"They're chocolates," Phil explained.

After a few tense seconds of staring at the package, he slowly started to calm, his expression going from fear to confusion.

"Food?" Phil tried.

He just furrowed his brow.

Did... did he even speak English? The documentation of his thoughts was in English, but to be frank, Phil had no idea how mind reading worked. The mind reader could have just been picking up concepts and translating.

"Uh..." Phil tore off the corner of the package and poured a few into his hands before extending it across the table, hopefully slowly enough not to startle him. He mostly got confusion in response with maybe, if Phil stretched the definition, a bit of curiosity. To demonstrate, Phil took one of the M&Ms from his own hand and popped it into his mouth. "Here," he said, reaching forward just a bit more. "Have one."

There was a blink and then, ever so slowly, the boy reached out a hand towards Phil. His hand was smaller than Phil's and a fingernail scrapped his palm lightly as he grabbed a red M&M. He mirrored the motions Phil had taken, tossing it the last few centimeters instead of putting it in his mouth directly. Phil smiled just a tad at that. He smiled more at the expression that crossed his face while chewing. Phil wouldn't necessarily call it enjoyment. He looked like he'd just discovered the concept of time itself and was contemplating what that meant for him and human kind at large. Phil took another M&M for himself and then offered the hand again.

They ever so slowly finished off the bag of M&Ms one at a time. Phil sat back in the chair once it was empty, shoving the packaging carelessly back into his pocket.

"I... should probably be going now," he said quietly. The kid didn't acknowledge his words, but just looked at Phil as he stood and walked over to the door. Phil glanced once more at him. "Goodbye," he said while leaving.

"That was something at least," Puffy said once he'd returned to the observation room and they'd gathered together to watch him through the glass once more.

"Do you think anyone would be mad if I came back again?" Phil asked.

She looked at the boy who had gone back to staring at the wall again. "I'll make sure it happens," she promised.

Fun fact. Technoblade actually doesn't end up loving M&Ms in the future. Like, they're fine, but he ends up liking other types of desserts much better. He will take this fact to his (permanent) grave. (Well, okay, he does tell Wilbur as a weird bloodless blood pack ritual, but the point is Phil never needs to know.)

Phil: I have gotten you M&Ms! Because I love you! We have a connection!

Technoblade (In his head): Please, Father. I have learned of the existence of Crunch Bars and Dove chocolate. I do not want the weird colorful encased chocolates. This is all you have packed for dessert in my lunch for the past decade. Please. I want a mint chocolate chip Blizzard from Dairy Queen.

Technoblade (Out loud): Thanks Phil.

Zero to Two

Chapter Notes

Warning for more temporary child murder. This gets a bit dark so be safe.

Things got more and more confusing for Technoblade by the moment. He did not understand where he was or why. People asked him questions he did not know the subject of let alone the answer to. Some people yelled. Some people didn't yell. Some people hit him. He could not figure out what distinguished these people from one another and never knew which type he'd get when they came to him. Food was there or it was not. Time blurred and for a while he could never latch onto a pattern to count the time. People came in and out and took him places. Most of the time he was in the small room he'd been put at the beginning. Sometimes he was in the table and mirror room. He did not know what purpose each room served.

It was similar in a lot of ways to his days off from fighting in The Pit, but he'd never gotten to go back to his room before his opponent was dead before. Maybe that was why a lot of the people were mad. People had been mad when he didn't kill the young child before, but that was different because Technoblade had tried with the last opponent. Shouldn't they be mad at the last opponent for not killing Technoblade? That would make more sense. He had assumed, actually, that they were mad at the opponent too, but that was proved false after a time.

The opponent was not bound like Technoblade. In fact, he seemed free to come and go as he pleased; clearly Technoblade was missing something. The first time the opponent had come to see Technoblade, Technoblade had assumed he was there to finally finish the fight. Yet, to his surprise, he had split a pack of unknown food called M and Ms with him until it was empty and then left.

That had not been the end of it either. The opponent had come back again and again, usually bringing another packet of strange food items. Sometimes, this was in the mirror room, but it had begun to happen more frequently in the other room, the cell.

The opponent was strange. Their first ever meeting had been in violence, but since then, he had never raised a hand to him like some of the others, nor did his voice ever grow loud. Technoblade had learned the opponent's name was Phil two visits ago. Perhaps he had said it before, but Technoblade had been listening this time.

He'd started to measure time in visits from Phil.

A visit from Phil was soon, he knew. It had been 15 meals since the last Phil visit and on average he would visit between 12 and 16. For now, Technoblade was just sitting on the bed as there was not much more to do in the cell.

He looked up when there was noise at the door. He'd learned long ago, though he wasn't sure how long as he hadn't been counting time in any way then, that they would want him to come to the door so they could restrain his wrists through the slot before they entered. So, he got up from the bed and obediently stuck his arms through the hole to have the restraints click around his wrist. Then, he retreated back to the corner of the cell furthest from the entrance.

The person walked into the cell and immediately closed the door behind them. Technoblade eyed them warily. The closing of the door instead of the grabbing of Technoblade to lead him off somewhere was not a good sign. Since it was not Phil, it was probably one of the hitting ones.

It did not take very long for him to be proven right. A fist cracked across his face, and it was certainly not the first time Technoblade had felt such a sensation, but it was still a bit of a surprise as most of the strikes while here had been below the neck.

It had all been rather typical for the first bit ignoring the part where the hitting touched his face, but then the knife had come out. He was actually surprised about it the first time. His mind had still been stuck on Phil the whole time he'd been here. As far as he was concerned, he was still in that fight, and so Phil would be the next one to kill him and he'd end up back in the alleyway. So, it came as a bit of a shock.

And then it came again.

And again.

And he quickly found out there was nowhere to go.

The power that brought him back had taken to settling him about 5 hits before the knife which meant his hands were restrained, the cell door was closed, and Technoblade had very few resources.

He would win eventually, because he always eventually did, but every direction he turned seemed to be a dead end. Usually, he would make some small amount of progress, but it felt like he was hitting the same wall again and again and again. In the upper 60s, he just let it happen a couple of times out of exhaustion, but he knew it wouldn't be over until he stopped it, so he went for another angle, and he died again.

He did manage to make some progress after 342. The point he jerked back to finally switched to the moment he managed to roll out of the way, the knife slicing a deep, but nonfatal, gash through his shoulder. He'd tried different angles for the roll and the kick that came with it, but it was the first that worked at all. It was not nearly enough. He had about five seconds before the knife was at his neck again.

21 more and he got a little further, not much, and not nearly enough to get him anywhere.

Or at least, it shouldn't have been.

It was more of a shock than the first death had been when the dying suddenly cut off at 363.

The door to the cell opened in that split second he'd gained and suddenly the form that had been baring down on him wasn't there anymore.

It was so strange for it to suddenly just stop in the middle. There were raised voices, though Technoblade did not make out much of what they were saying. He just stayed where he'd been laid out and breathed. The world filtered back in slowly.

"...a murderer!" managed to stick in Technoblade's mind. It was from the voice of **363**. That word had been yelled at him many times since he'd been here. It was some sort of accusation he'd managed to gather, but he didn't really know what it meant.

"Maybe, but you're not a bloody executioner!" and that was, Phil? Technoblade hadn't heard him yell before. He almost didn't recognize his voice.

Technoblade didn't bother to listen to the rest as more people and voice and yelling came and went in a blur.

Something touched him and he felt his entire body go rigid. *Dying. Dying. He was dying. He was going to die.*

Yet, that was not what happened. He was scooped up off the floor and carefully set on the edge of the bed. He blinked, focusing on Phil. They were alone, and at some point, Phil had been given a bag. Technoblade was still braced for the next death, for the next batch of deaths really, but Phil's hands were nothing but gentle on his skin. He inspected the deep gash on Technoblade's arm oozing blood and the cuts on his face.

Phil took things from the bag, many of which Technoblade did not recognize. He put some sort of jell near the cut on his arm that made the skin around the wound tingle oddly before cleaning it and sewing it up in a way that barely hurt. The wounds on his face were then carefully cleaned and a few of them bandaged. The whole time Phil spoke to him, mostly meaningless reassurances and explanations of what he was doing. Explanations of how he was helping Technoblade. Phil was healing him.

And suddenly, he understood.

2.

It was a very different type of number.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hello again,” Phil said as he entered the cell. The cell’s occupant looked up at him. He tilted his head at the words and gave him a slow blink back in greeting much like a cat. Phil smiled back at him. The interaction still wasn’t much, but he was certainly reacting more now if only to Phil. On the rare occasion, Phil would even go so far as to say he *interacted* with Phil. He still didn’t react to anyone else he saw, not even Puffy, but in some ways that made sense considering the incidents that had come before.

The cell they were currently in was not the one the boy had been housed in three weeks ago. That one had been one of the regular higher security cells, but he’d been moved here after he’d almost been stabbed to death by someone allowed in by the guards. Though, that had not been the only reason. No, the main reason he’d been moved was that after treating the shoulder wound and the cuts on his face, Phil had moved to check him for non-obvious wounds and had found an array of horror under his shirt. It had become abundantly clear that someone or multiple someones on the normal guard rotation had taken it upon themselves to punish the boy for his crimes repeatedly. He’d had a whole gradient of partially healed bruises on his torso.

No wonder he’d never wanted to fucking interact with anyone.

Phil had managed to strong-arm the higher ups into getting him a new cell with guards that Phil himself had carefully scrutinized. He’d done this mostly by implying he could leak it to the press. Neither Phil nor the higher ups knew exactly how the public as a whole would react, but it’d been enough of a threat for them to allow it.

“How are you today?” Phil asked now.

The boy drew his feet up onto his bed and shifted slightly so he was sitting closer to his pillows and was facing the middle of the bed. Did he look at Phil expectantly as he walked over or was Phil just reading too much into the situation?

“So.” Phil took a seat on the opposite edge of the bed, pulling one knee up onto it so they were facing each other with about two feet between them. “Don’t tell anybody,” not that it was much of a risk, “but I snuck you in more than a candy bar today.” He was slow to reach into the folds of his superhero costume (and goodness was he glad his was not one of those tight-fitting ones some heroes liked to wear) and his efforts were rewarded by the boy not flinched, but instead just watching his hand intently. He didn’t even jump at the crinkleing sound the packaging made. Phil set an entire package of double stuffed Oreos between them.

The boy looked at the cookies and then back up at Phil.

“Now,” Phil mused. “Technically a serving of these is 3 cookies, so we really *shouldn’t* eat the whole package, but...” he grinned at him, “I did go through the struggle of smuggling them all in here so maybe we can make an exception.” With that, Phil reached forward to tear open the pack and take a cookie for himself. He pulled it apart to eat the insides fist and the boy watched him, not moving until he’d finished the entire cookie.

Then, the boy reached forward to take one for himself. He proceeded to painstakingly copy Phil's method, a furrow of concentration between his brows, and Phil just barely resisted a laugh. He finished the cookie, and then looked to Phil.

Phil sighed. "You don't have to wait for me every time, mate," he told him, even as he took another cookie and ate it, so the boy would feel comfortable enough to take another. This method of sharing the container of cookies was honestly, painfully slow for Phil who usually ate Oreos alone in his apartment where there was no one around to judge him. However, after about two years of taking turns eating cookies, they did manage to finish off the entire package.

Then they stared at each other.

Usually, this would be the point where Phil would be off. He usually only stayed for 15 minutes or so. It wasn't as though they had riveting conversations. He just wanted to be around for the kid to show him a bit of kindness and hope he'd eventually open up in some way. Today, however, he found himself lingering and looking around the dreary little cell. "You must be bored," Phil commented. Puffy had left him with blank paper and crayons a few times, hoping he'd show an interest in them once he was alone, but they'd never come back to them having been used or even moved.

The boy, of course, did not react to Phil's observation.

"Is there anything you'd be interested in?" Phil asked, looking him over. Books were likely out of the question considering Phil wasn't even sure if he *spoke* English. No toys or anything else he'd been offered had garnered more than a glance. Really, the only thing he reacted to in a positive way was food, but there had to be something else.

Phil thought for a moment and decided to try something. He pulled his smartphone out of his pocket and navigated to the home screen. He didn't exactly have many things on his phone. He mostly only had the contraption so The Guild could easily contact him and for the calendar app. However, he did have a few other things.

He thought about the YouTube app, but quickly discarded it due to the understanding English problem. Solitaire seemed like it probably wouldn't interest him at all and would likely be confusing and Candy Crush was *loud*. Left with no better options, he opened a game he mostly just used to pass the time in boring meetings: 2048. It was a fairly simple game even if the boy didn't understand what was happening with the numbers. He just needed to match blocks with the same symbols and colors to make different blocks. That should be easy enough.

"Here," he said, clicking on the app. "Want to try?" He plopped the phone into the kid's hands. The kid stared up at him. "You just," Phil said, leaning over slightly. He swiped left to demonstrate. The boy watched the tiles on the screen move and then seemed to get the hint. He reached his own hand up to repeat the action. Phil was a little worried it'd be like the Oreos and he wouldn't make another move until Phil did, but to his relief, he swiped left again on his own... and then again... and then again... and then he frowned when the screen didn't move anymore. "You can do other directions," Phil told him. He reached over and swiped up, then down, then right, so he knew all the ways he could move.

With this new knowledge, the boy began to swipe seemingly at random until the 'Game over' screen popped up once there were no more moves.

"Here," Phil said. "Try again." He pushed the 'Try again' button to reset the game and the boy looked at it, beginning to swipe again. He seemed to start to pick up what he was meant to do on his third game, hesitating before making a move instead of just swiping randomly and observing. By the fifth

game, he managed to win. Which was... honestly sort of impressive considering how he hadn't seemed to pick anything else up before.

"You won," Phil said softly. "Good job."

Phil still wasn't sure if the boy understood his words, but he seemed to understand the tone at least. He looked... pleased. He seemed legitimately pleased by his accomplishment. Phil found himself once again wondering where on Earth the boy had come from. How did he get like this? Did he have parents? Where were they? Had anyone ever told him he'd done a good job at anything? What had they told him he'd done a good job at? He wished he could ask these questions and get an answer, but the most he got was the boy handing him back the phone.

Phil took it and smiled sadly at the boy. "You're right," he said. "I should probably get going. I know Puffy'll be in before lunch. I'll... be back tomorrow."

He picked up the Oreo packaging and slipped it back into his robes. The boy watched him as he rose from the bed and walked to the door.

He glanced back at him briefly. "Have a good day," he said before leaving. Maybe he could find some better games to download onto his phone in the meantime.

Chapter End Notes

"This method of sharing the container of cookies was honestly, painfully slow for Phil who usually ate Oreos alone in his apartment where there was no one around to judge him."

Last Tuesday in Phil's living room

Ghostbur (lingering above his father's couch): Man. My dad's depressed.

And Two to Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They came to get him once again. It was a bit after a meal and a while before Phil would probably be showing up. At one point it had mostly been the same people coming to talk to him in his cell or to take him to the one other room with a big mirror. Yet, in the past some amount of time, other people would come to take him to other places.

Something was happening, Technoblade thought. He was not sure what. There were many different rooms. There were many different people. One woman in particular came to talk to him again and again. She would try to hand him pieces of paper with symbols on them. After some study, it was clear they made some sort of pattern, but not one he could decipher.

The woman had shown up in smaller rooms at first, but she had also shown up when he started being taken to larger rooms. She usually sat next to him at a table in these bigger rooms instead of across from him like she did in the smaller rooms. Though, she would get up often to talk to all of the other people in the room.

There were a lot of people in the big rooms. There was another person who also sat at table different than the one that Technoblade and the woman sat at. They also talked to everyone a lot. All three of them faced another person who was sitting higher for some reason; they seemed to be in charge of whatever thing was going on. Then there was another group of people off to the side that didn't talk as much. He had no idea what they were doing. He did not know what any of them were doing really, except maybe the guards at the exits. Everyone said large words he didn't understand. All he really picked up was that they'd named him 'The Defendant' for whatever the event was.

They hadn't taken him to any big rooms in a while though. Today they did not take him to a big room either. They took him to a new place. It was a smaller room with only a few people in it. They had him sit in a strange chair and attached things to him. He allowed this with no small amount of confusion. They said more things then with more words that didn't make sense. Eventually, one of them hit a switch.

It was a bad death.

Sensations usually didn't linger once he went back, but he could still almost feel it even once he was back in the hallway halfway between his cell and the room. He felt sick and jittery. It was like that particular death sizzled and popped in his veins even when the electricity that caused it was not there.

He tore himself away from the people leading him to that room immediately. They were clearly shocked at his sudden shift of behavior, but the lingering feeling of that death spurned him to move quickly and violently. He slammed his head into the stomach of a guard that tried to grab him, picked a random hallway, and bolted.

Shouts came from behind him, and the guards were immediately in pursuit. He thought about fighting, but discarded the idea quickly remembering the last time he'd tried to fight while restrained. For now, he would run and dodge until those things were no longer options. He slammed into and evaded anyone who ended up in front of him, though many of them just seemed confused. He went in random directions since he had no idea what the layout of this building was. When he shouldered his way through a set of double-doors into a larger open space, he spared a second to look around himself

for the best possible path. There were many people in the room, but his eyes caught on one in particular.

Phil.

Technoblade had no idea if the decision he made in a split second was the optimal choice, but he did know that Phil had stopped it twice before. He turned and ran straight at him.

Phil's wings flared at Technoblade's approach, surprised and defensive. He put one arm up as though to stop him, but Technoblade dove for the ground. He collapsed on his knees at his feet, breathing heavily from his recent sprint. He looked up and their eyes met for a moment. *Please. Please. Please,* he thought and then folded forward, pressing his face into the soft fabric of Phil's uniform right above the knee.

There was a moment where it felt like the air itself froze around them, and then a hand touched the back of his head, gentle and steady. It was not necessarily a promise of anything, but Technoblade still let out a shaky relieved breath anyway.

The noise of his pursuers settled down behind him as they caught up and saw that he'd stopped.

“What's going on?” Phil asked, his voice softened by confusion.

Technoblade recognized the voice that spoke behind him. He'd been one of the people who had been speaking before the switch was flicked. “I'm not sure,” he said. “He must have figured it out somehow.”

“Figured out what?” Phil asked.

There was a moment of silence. “Uh...” the voice said. “Well, you see...”

“His execution is scheduled for today,” a different voice Technoblade did not recognize spoke up.

“His *what*?” Phil asked.

“His execution,” the voice reiterated. Technoblade stored the word away. He'd heard it before but hadn't made the connection until now. He still wasn't 100% sure what it meant other than dying in a very bad way.

“How did I not know about that?” Phil asked.

“I made an executive decision.”

“You can't just *kill* someone.”

“He was given a trial. We kept it out of the news, but he was given one. Now the sentence is being handed out.”

“You had a trial?” Phil asked. “He hasn't even said a word yet! How could he defend himself in court? He's not even fit for trial. Puffy doesn't even think he knows what's going on around him most of the time. You can't just...”

“He's never going to speak, Phil,” the voice said, sounding impatient. “He's probably not even capable of it. We can't just hold him here forever. Not after what he's done.”

“But...” Phil said. “He’s just a child.”

“It’s not a fucking child, Phil,” the voice snapped. “Don’t you get it? It’s a monster. It slaughtered people with barely a thought. It took a sword and stabbed it indiscriminately through the chests of civilians and heroes alike. For god’s sake, man. Can’t your fucking trauma focus on *that* part of this. Not the fact that he looks young.”

There was silence so absolute that Technoblade thought for a moment he’d died without noticing it and was about to be sent back to the hallway. Then, in the silence, he heard Phil take in a sharp breath. “I won’t stand for this.”

“It’s not your decision to make, Phil,” the voice said, leaving room for no argument. “Fall in line.”

“I said,” Phil said, and suddenly Technoblade was being lifted from his position on his knees. He went limp, allowing himself to be picked up and arranged so Phil could hold him to his chest with one arm. “I won’t stand for this. You can’t stop me.”

“Phil,” the voice reasoned. “Think about this. You can’t just go against a court ordered execution and break a prisoner out of jail. You can’t go against me. You’re a hero.”

From his position in Phil’s arms, Technoblade could see the way Phil’s large wings were flared out behind him, open and imposing. “Consider this my resignation.”

Phil moved and there was a cacophony of confusing noises in the next moment. Things broke and people shouted, but Technoblade just stayed lax in Phil’s steady grip. The next thing he knew, they were in open air and Phil was flying them away from the noise. It was just like the first day they’d met, but this time they were leaving the building Technoblade had been living in instead of going towards it.

The whipping wind against his face finally soothed away the anxious buzzing that had been under his skin since the last death. He leaned his head against Phil’s shoulder, content he wouldn’t have to do that death again.

That was three times.

Chapter End Notes

The man speaking was the Head of the Guild, by the way. Techno's perspective doesn't really give you that info. He was the one who ran it before Dream in the One More Step Out of the Pit Timeline. He's not... he's not great.

Words in a Trainyard

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil flew to the outskirts of the city after fleeing the Guild. He had been unsure the entire time where exactly he was going, but he ended up landing in a clearly abandoned trainyard when he spotted it. He was fairly certain no one had followed them, and there was no close by to stumble upon them, so he let himself relax a bit. Or at least, he relaxed as much as he could given...all of that.

The boy was still in his arms, having not moved or struggled the entire flight. It had been like carrying a ragdoll. Phil set him down on his feet, and he wobbled a bit. He would have fallen if Phil hadn't grabbed his arms to steady him; Phil ended up holding most of his weight. His eyes met Phil's with something in them that Phil couldn't read. He hoped it was something positive towards Phil considering what he had just done for him, but it wasn't exactly easy to tell.

"Here," Phil said. "You should probably sit down." He waved to the ground and the boy obediently knelt and then sat. He looked rough, honestly: rougher than he had when Phil had stopped in to see him the day before. He looked more tired and was a bit more withdrawn (which was saying something with him). Phil guessed that made sense for someone who'd just barely dodged an execution.

God.

He couldn't deal with those thoughts right now. He was a hero... or he'd been a hero. Things weren't supposed to go that way at the Superhero Guild. There were... there were rules. He should understand what was happening before they put him on trial let alone... that.

Phil turned his attention to the bag he'd happened to have on him when the boy had sprinted at him. The contents included his wallet, his phone (which he quickly moved to turn off), and a bottle of apple juice from the vending machine he'd grabbed. He popped open the juice and took a couple of sips for himself before leaning down to hand it to the boy.

"Drink," he said, gesturing at the bottle. Phil wasn't sure if he understood the word, but he still obeyed, tilting his head back to drink the juice.

They'd need more than juice for this, Phil thought. They'd need food and water soon. They'd need a place to stay because he couldn't go back to his apartment. Because he was running from the Superhero Guild with a convicted mass murderer.

"What am I doing?" Phil sighed to himself. He eyed the child in front of him. Phil knew for a fact that it was not right that he'd been put on trial and given the death penalty in his state, but... he had killed a bunch of people with no hesitation, and he could do it again. It made for quite the moral conundrum. Phil was pretty sure there was something more to what had happened. There had to be, otherwise it didn't make sense. Yet, he was still obviously dangerous. Was it right of Phil to break him out when it could cost more lives than one? The head of the Guild certainly hadn't thought so. Their conversation before Phil quit ran through his mind. What if the boy snapped again and Phil couldn't stop him? He eyed the suppression cuff and wondered if that was the only thing keeping him from attacking Phil now. "Would you kill me right now if I took that off?" he mused to himself, turning to pace.

"Why would I kill you?" a voice said, unfamiliar and rough from disuse.

Phil froze and turned his head to blink at the boy. His brow was pinched in confusion which matched the words. His mouth had just finished closing when Phil looked at him. No one else was here. There was only one conclusion. “You can *talk*?”

The boy did not respond verbally. He just tilted his head and blinked.

“No, no,” Phil said. “I’m not crazy. You just talked. Talk to me.”

Silence. Phil was honestly starting to think he was just having audio hallucinations from stress, until the boy’s mouth opened just slightly, and a hoarse voice said, “Okay.”

“Okay,” Phil repeated, still not quite believing it. “So, you can talk. You went through an entire trial to decide if you would get executed and you never said a word?”

He stared at Phil. His nose scrunched just a touch.

“Are you going to answer me?” asked Phil.

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He closed his mouth and tilted his head to the side. Phil watched him seem to struggle with his words before he finally said, “I don’t know those words.”

“Which words?” Phil asked.

He paused and thought. “Execution was the chair death.” His tone read as though it was a statement, but his eyes held questions. “Trial was... the big room with the long talks.”

“Yes,” Phil confirmed. “You... you were put on trial for murder. They decided if you were guilty or not and if you should be executed... killed.”

The boy stared at him again, silent.

“You...” Phil said. “What word?”

“Murder.”

Phil puffed out a long breath. Jesus. Christ. He slowly sunk to the ground and sat down in front of him. “Murder is killing someone, but a certain type of killing. It’s on purpose without a valid reason, so not an accident or in self-defense or because someone had to.”

He seemed to understand, nodding decisively.

Phil looked him over and he stared back vacantly. “You’re pretty confused, huh?” Phil asked.

No response, but there was a brief blink.

Phil sighed. “What’s your name?”

“They called me Technoblade,” he replied.

“*Technoblade*?” Phil asked. He floundered for a moment as the boy stared at him blankly. “I... that is an interesting name. I’m Phil.”

He nodded. Clearly, he was already aware.

“So, uh, Technoblade,” Phil said, struggling to find words, but not wanting to end this conversation, fearing if he did, he’d never hear another word from the boy. “Do you have any questions then?”

He nodded and Phil waited. And waited.

“And what would one of those be?” he finally asked.

Technoblade frowned, hesitated. “I do not know where we are.”

“We’re in an old trainyard,” Phil replied. “No one really comes here, but the old train cars are good for shelter.”

He did not nod. He only stared.

“What did you not understand?”

“Train.”

“Uh, a train is a vehicle. It’s a bunch of train cars which are this,” he pointed to one near them, “and they’re all connected and usually have stuff in them. They’re pulled different places by an engine on tracks which are paths the train can’t get off of.”

Slow blink.

“Which words?”

“Vehicle. Engine.”

“Car?”

Nod.

“A car is a type of vehicle. Vehicles move things. A lot of the time when we say it, we mean they move them with an engine which is a device that lets them move.”

He thought and then nodded.

“Uh, so that’s where we are,” continued Phil. “We’re in an old trainyard. The trains here aren’t used anymore, so they don’t go anywhere. It should be safe to hide in for now.” Technoblade nodded, seeming satisfied with that.

Phil sat lost for a moment before standing. “We can… probably take shelter in one of the train cars for the night at least. I’ll have to go find food…” He held out a hand. “Come on,” he said. Technoblade stared at his hand for a moment before offering his own. Phil grabbed it and pulled him to his feet.

Phil had no idea what was going on, but something told him he’d made the right decision.

Chapter End Notes

And so begins the trainyard bros arch. We finally will get to learn why they vaguely refer to the trainyard so often in One More Step Out of the Pit. Poor man Phil is going to have backpain

from sleeping in the train cars. His children will make fun of him for this even once he's in his early 30s again.

Four Things

Chapter Summary

Bed, Food, Freedom, (and Stars)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hey, Tech,” Phil said. Tech. Phil had been doing that a lot recently, shortening his name when he said it instead of pronouncing the whole thing. He seemed to favor the shortened name of Techno and used it most often to refer to him. ‘Tech’ was used more sparingly and Technoblade had begun to think of it as something softer, because Phil would more often use it when he was checking to see if Technoblade was okay or when he noticed Technoblade was twitchy and would talk softly to him until he felt better. Technoblade had even been referred to simply as just ‘No’ once when the man had been half asleep. It had made something warm bubble in his chest. It was nice, he thought.

‘Tech,’ was nice too and there was something special about it because it seemed more purposeful. Phil had a reason when he used it, and the reason was always kind. It was soft like the blanket Phil was wrapping around his shoulders right now, soft like the bed that he’d been given, soft like Phil’s voice in the morning even when he was grumbling about how he thought the beds *weren’t* soft.

“How was your day?” Phil asked. It was question number 4 of 5 for the day, and it was an expected one. Questions 1-3 were often random. They could be asking him a question about himself or asking him what he’d done while Phil was away. Sometimes they were asking him to pick between two foods for a meal. Question 4, however, was always something to the extent of ‘How was your day?’ even if Phil had seen his entire day.

“Good,” he answered, because Phil liked it when he verbally responded to the questions he asked, often insisting upon it. He was a strange man. Most people didn’t even want responses at all.

“I’m glad,” he said. “I brought you out some peaches for if you’re still hungry.” He offered an opened can with a spoon in it to Technoblade and Technoblade took it. Most food, Technoblade had discovered, came from cans, even much of it that Phil served on plates originally came from cans. Technoblade watched him take the food out of the cans and put them in pans to heat them up every night. Other food came in shiny fabric Phil called ‘wrappers.’ He liked those foods better, but Phil would not let him eat only them. Peaches were okay too. Better than peas.

He used the spoon to start taking out parts of the peaches to eat, but most of his attention turned back to the sky which he’d been looking at before Phil had returned back outside. He had not seen the sky often in his life. He’d seen it for a bit between escaping the fighting ring and Phil, but he’d mostly been distracted in that time. In the trainyard, he got to see the sky a lot. Phil didn’t keep him inside a lot. Technoblade had to be inside if Phil was gone, but other than that, he was allowed to wander around outside whenever he wanted. It was nice. It was different. Most of his life, he spent locked in some place, but with Phil, most of his time was spent either in a place with an open door or in a place with no walls surrounding him that he could see.

The sky changed during the day, just like people turned the lights off in rooms sometimes, though it was often more gradually done than flicking off a light. He wondered who changed the sky's brightness. He wondered why they left smaller lights on most of the time, not that Technoblade was complaining. He liked those lights.

Phil made a groaning sound as sat down next to him. He often talked to Technoblade even when he wasn't asking questions, but today he seemed content to be quiet, leaning back on his hands to look upwards. He was looking at the sky lights as well. Technoblade wondered if he liked them too.

Technoblade finished the peaches and put the empty can next to him with the spoon in it. Phil moved then, leaning forward to tuck his hands loosely beneath his knees. "Have any questions you want to ask me today?" he asked, looking at Technoblade.

No matter what, that was always Phil's 5th question of the day. Technoblade almost answered 'no' like he'd always done before, but then he hesitated. Phil probably knew what the lights in the sky were. Technoblade wanted to know. After a few long moments, he nodded slowly. "Yes."

Phil paused upon hearing his answer. "Go ahead and ask me," he said. "I'll do my best to answer."

Technoblade hesitated. He had never really asked questions out loud before, he didn't think. He pointed to the sky with a cautious finger. "What are those?" he asked in a whisper.

The man's eyes followed Technoblade's finger. "That is a great question, Tech," Phil said. "Tech" again. "Those are stars. They're actually really big and really bright balls of mass way high up in the sky. They're so far away, in fact, that they look tiny and just like a little bit of light, but they're huge and brighter than any light humans could make. Some are brighter than the sun."

Technoblade looked up at the stars trying to fit this explanation to what he was seeing with his eyes.

He saw Phil shift out of the corner of his eye. "Would you like to know more about them?" he asked.

That was 6 questions for the day, and it threw Technoblade off a bit, but he cautiously nodded.

"Well," Phil said, seeming to be willing to take a nonverbal answer since he'd broken the rule and asked another question himself. "I don't claim to be an expert on any part of stars, but I know some things. I feel like we'd be losing something if I didn't start with what people said about stars before science said what they physically are. So, let's talk about constellations. I actually know the legend behind Ursa Major and Minor off the top of my head. If you like it, I can brush up on some others." He pointed to the sky, his hand much more sure than Technoblade's had been. "Constellations," he explained, "are pictures people have made in the sky. See the brightest star up there? That's where you start to look..."

Technoblade struggled to see the pictures of the bears in the sky even as Phil pointed out the stars that made them up, though that could be because he was not fully certain what a bear was in the first place. Despite that though, he couldn't help but stare at the sky as Phil started to tell him of a story about a woman named Callisto and her son Arcas.

Chapter End Notes

Technoblade (listening to myths about the stars): This is going to awaken something in me.

Phil, you once again have no idea what you've done, my man.

No <3

Chapter Summary

Technoblade has discovered a new word. He has also (unwillingly) discovered conditioner.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Okay, Phil decided. That was enough of this. He and Techno had been having the same argument for over two weeks and, while Phil typically tried to take a genial approach to getting Technoblade to do things, he was going to have to put his foot down on this one.

Technoblade had begun to change in the past five months. When they'd first come here, he'd been dependent and docile like a newborn baby in a lot of ways despite knowing basic things like how to eat and, apparently, speak. For the first month and a half, he'd blindly accepted whatever Phil did for him, only speaking when spoken to and then only answering what Phil asked.

Then, one evening, he'd finally asked a question, and it had been one so simple and fundamentally human. He had asked what stars were and Phil's answer had opened something up in him. He did not stop asking questions after that. The frequency of his inquiries increased every day and after a few weeks, he started to ask them without being prompted. 'What is that?' 'How does it do that?' 'Where did it come from?' These questions became commonplace as he became more comfortable asking them.

One day, since he could not read, Phil had bought him a portable DVD player (or, well, he'd stolen it and left an appropriate amount of money in the empty case) and the first box set of DVDs he could find about stars and another one about Greek Mythology. Phil had to pull him away from the screen for meals and to sleep for the next month. He had found him trying to hide the light under his covers multiple times in the middle of the night.

Of course, inevitably, with the discovery of questions, came questioning *him*. 'Why?' became a frequent question as soon as he discovered it's existence, and if Phil did not have an adequate answer (and more and more frequently even if he *did*) he would get back another of Technoblade's newly acquired words: 'no.'

Phil could not disparage the change. It was, from what Phil had gathered, his first ever taste of autonomy, though Phil knew he was still restricting him a bit with the cuff that remained on his wrist and the limits he had on where he could go. Phil could take him refusing to eat his peas.

Still, it could be frustrating. Especially at times like now. Techno met his eyes from across the train car they'd turned into a home and there was already a 'no' in his eyes. He knew what was about to be asked as Phil set out the supplies, and he was having none of it. After all, they'd talked about it at length many times. This was the first time Phil had the supplies gathered though. He'd grabbed a few things on his last trip to the city.

A tantruming six-year-old. A tantruming six-year-old is how Phil would describe him when he had that look on his face. From a newborn baby to a six-year-old in five months. At this rate, he'd be in

his 30s by 18.

“Technoblade,” he finally said. There had been no reason to call his name. His eyes were already boring into Phil. “You already know what I’m going to say.”

He narrowed his eyes. A tantruming six-year-old, Phil thought, who did not understand why he needed to take care of his hair. This experience was strangely familiar: Phil standing opposed to a glaring child, haircare product in hand. Now, Technoblade’s hair was not curly like... well, he had straight hair which meant it was not as chaotic as Phil was very aware hair could be. However, unlike Phil’s hair which was not only straight, but rather thin, Techno had thick hair. It was still relatively short, coming to just below his shoulders, but it was already starting to get matted. The other week, he’d still had sticks in it after washing it in the make-shift shower in the other train car. Something had to be done.

“Technoblade,” Phil said again, when Techno did not give in to his silent demands. “Let me cut your hair.”

“No,” Techno replied as anticipated, tossing his absolutely stringy ass hair like a discount valley girl.

“This,” Phil said as sternly as he could. “Is no longer a debate. I need to do something with your hair, and the least painful solution is to cut it.” He gestured at the pair of scissors set out on the tv tray in front of him.

Techno’s eyes flickered to them and then back to Phil. “Get those things anywhere near me, and I’ll use them to cut off your hand,” he threatened.

Now, perhaps Phil should be more worried about a threat like that all things considered. It was the first real expression of violent tendencies he’d shown towards Phil since Phil had stopped his murderous rampage across the city. Yet, even with that knowledge, he was still staring down a scrawny 14-year-old kid who was currently having a tantrum fit for a child half his age over a haircut. There was probably something wrong with Phil’s survival instincts, but he just couldn’t find it in himself to take him seriously.

“Techno,” said Phil.

Technoblade glared at him haughtily. “Phil,” he returned.

Phil almost wanted to laugh, though he was unsure if it would be a hysterical laugh brought on by frustration or just him laughing at the *sass* on this child; where did it come from?

“Okay,” Phil breathed. “Okay. Compromise. I’m willing to compromise. We have to fix your hair somehow. The options are cut it, or you sit there and you let me wash it and brush it out. Note: it will hurt a bit to brush out those matts. Then, you have to keep it properly clean going forward.”

“I know how to clean my hair,” Techno insisted.

“No,” Phil said, “if you did, it wouldn’t look like that. At that length you need conditioner, and you *have* to brush it or comb it or put it up right. You have to do something so there aren’t literal sticks and probably bugs embedded into your hair.”

He frowned, unconvinced. “No.”

“Yes.”

He turned away. "No."

Phil sighed. "Come on, Tech," he cajoled, deciding to relent and fall back on his last resort method to get a child to do as he said: bribery. "I'll let you have a chocolate bar when we're finished."

Techno's eyes returned to him. Interest. "What kind?" he asked.

"You can choose," Phil said.

Phil waited with bated breath. He could see the answer a moment before it came. "Fine," he said. "No scissors."

Well, that'd be more difficult, but at least he gave a bit. "No scissors," he agreed, reaching forward to store them away back in the lockbox he kept with all of the sharp objects they possessed. "Let me get a bucket and warm up some water."

He decided warming up some water in the tea kettle to mix with cooler water would be enough to just wash his hair. He'd boil some more later for the final rinse, but it'd last for the shampooing. Techno watched him set everything up still looking very unenthused, but he was no longer arguing for the moment.

"Come sit here," Phil said once he'd put a bucket on a table next to a chair that would be about the right height to wash his hair in. He did so reluctantly, sitting with his back towards Phil. Phil poured the boiling water into a pitcher and added some of the cool water until it was just warm. "Alright, tilt your head back so I can get your hair wet." He did, staring up at Phil like he was going to commit a homicide.

...

Probably not the best simile to use, to be fair.

Phil carefully poured water over his hair until it seemed wet enough, and then set the pitcher aside. He grabbed the shampoo bottle out of the plastic bag at his feet.

"Why is the shampoo bottle different?" he asked.

"I grabbed some detangling shampoo for you. It makes it easier to brush out tangles afterwards," he said. "At least, I assume it'll work okay on your hair type as well. It'll at least not hurt." He poured a bit of shampoo into his hand. "You might want to close your eyes, so you don't get soap in them," he warned.

Techno blinked up at him.

"Up to you," Phil said. He'd try his best not to let the soap go towards his eyes. "Alright, I'm going to start washing your hair now."

Techno watched him closely as his hands approached, his whole body tensed. Techno did not like to be touched, Phil knew, which was another reason why it probably would have been better to just swiftly cut the hair off versus painstakingly combing out the tangles. Phil had had to be careful at the beginning as he tended to be physically affectionate on instinct and Techno never verbally protested which meant it'd been up to Phil to realize and stop the behavior when it made him uncomfortable. It was almost strange at this point to reach out and touch him after training himself not to do so.

It took a few moments, but most of the tension left his shoulders once he processed exactly what Phil was doing to him. When a bit of soap drifted too close to his eyes for comfort, he eventually ended up squeezing them closed.

“I’m going to rinse the soap out now,” Phil warned once he was finished. “You definitely are going to want to keep your eyes shut for that one, okay?”

“Okay,” he answered. Phil grabbed the still warm water and carefully rinsed all of the soap out of his hair into the bucket.

“Alright,” Phil said, “you’re rinsed. You can sit up.”

He did so and opened his eyes, squinting through the remaining water droplets clinging to his eyelashes.

“Here.” Phil offered him a washrag to dry his face.

“Are we done?” he asked.

“Nope,” Phil sighed. “You chose the long route. That was the easy part. Next, we’re going to get some conditioner in this and comb out all of the tangles.”

“What’s conditioner?”

“It helps keep your hair from getting damaged and also helps detangle it,” Phil said. He grabbed the bottle to show him and allowed him to take it when he grabbed for it.

“Hair gets damaged?” he asked, staring at the picture on the bottle.

“Yep,” Phil answered. “It’s especially prone to it when it’s long.”

Techno looked at it for a while more before handing it back to Phil. Phil moved the chairs around a bit so he could reach him easier without the bucket in the way and then poured a bit of conditioner into his palm.

“I’m going to start putting this in your hair,” he warned before moving forward to start working it into the ends. Techno did not tense under this new treatment thankfully, though Phil had a feeling it wasn’t going to last considering what was coming after.

“Phil?” Techno asked.

“Yes?”

“Why are we here?”

“Erm,” Phil said, getting more conditioner. It was perhaps more than necessary, but they needed all the help they could get. “I’m currently washing your hair because it’s matted.”

“No, I mean. There aren’t any other people here. You brought me here.”

Phil paused. “You were going to be executed,” he said. “So, I... we ran away, so they wouldn’t do that.”

“Why?”

“Well,” Phil said. “I guess because I didn’t want you to die.”

There was no response for a very long time, and Phil went back to putting the conditioner in his hair.

“Okay,” he said, once finished. “This next part, unfortunately, might be a little painful. I’ve got to get the knots out, but I’ll do my best to make it not hurt. Upkeep will be easier. Tell me if it does hurt, yeah?”

Techno nodded and Phil started with his fingers, just pulling the matts apart the best he could. His hair definitely could have been worse, would have been, if he’d left it any longer.

“Sorry,” Phil said with a wince when he pulled in a way that *had* to have hurt, though Techno said nothing about it. He just tilted his head at the apology. “I’m going to try this area with the comb a bit now,” Phil said. He was as careful as he could be, being sure to start working on the ends and holding the section he was working on with his opposite hand to prevent as much pulling as possible.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Techno said suddenly after a few minutes of this. “Not really.”

“I... good,” Phil said even though it had to be a lie. These mats were rough.

“Nothing’s hurt me since you brought me here,” Techno continued. “Why?”

“Well,” Phil said, fully unprepared for this conversation. He had just wanted to clean the boy’s hair. “I supposed because I don’t want to hurt you.”

There was a long pause. “Sorry,” Technoblade finally decided on.

Phil blinked. “For what?” he asked.

“I threatened to cut off your hand,” Technoblade said. “I will not do that.”

Phil couldn’t help but laugh, having to stop with the combing to compose himself. “I...I know Techno,” he said once he got himself under control. “It’s alright.”

“I don’t want to hurt you either,” Techno said.

“Thanks Tech,” Phil said softly.

“...Are you finished?”

“Oh, no,” Phil said, remembering that he was in the middle of something. “There’s a bit more to go and then we need to wash this out and dry it. Here,” he pulled out his phone and shoved it into his hands. “To distract yourself with while I finish.”

Techno grabbed for it enthusiastically and Phil had to smile. He did like his phone games.

It was a slow process, but he did manage to get the mats dealt with after a while and eventually switched to a brush.

“Goodness, you have a lot of hair,” Phil commented once the brush was running through it smoothly.

“It is short,” Techno pointed out.

“Yes, but it’s very thick,” he said, “and actually a bit longer than I’d thought.” He pulled a strand taunt and tapped his back where it landed. Tangled and dry, it had been just below his shoulders, but wet

and brushed out, it brushed the bottom of his shoulder blades. “It goes here when wet. You sure you don’t want me to cut some of this off?”

“No,” he said, decisively.

“I’ll have to show you to braid it or something to keep it out of your face,” he contemplated. “Time to wash out the conditioner. Back to the bucket.”

He washed out the conditioner and then Techno allowed him to blow-dry it on the condition he got a chocolate bar with sea-salt and caramel to eat during the drying. (No loss to Phil considering that was the weirdest chocolate flavor in Phil’s opinion and he’d gotten a mixed pack with the flavor in it on accident once. Techno liked it apparently though.) Techno’s hair dried in thick white waves with brittle split-ends Phil longed to trim, but just having it properly clean was enough for now.

He ended up braiding it experimentally into a simple braid, though he felt like Techno’s thick hair would do better with a more complicated one. Phil had no idea how to do one of those though, so for now, it was good enough.

“There,” Phil said once finished tying it up with one of his own hair ties. “You have earned your freedom.”

Techno pulled away and reached around to poke at the braid experimentally. “I am not saying thank you,” he decreed.

“That’s probably fair,” Phil laughed. “It was under coercion and bribery.” Yet, Phil had reason to believe that was Techno’s way to communicate he was satisfied with the clean braided hair.

Chapter End Notes

Phil: Teaches Techno basic autonomy.

Techno: Stats to say 'no.'

Phil:



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And Now You're Fifteen

Chapter Summary

It's Technoblade's birthday. He's turning 15.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Technoblade woke on his own power. It was strange because usually Phil woke him up in the mornings and made him go take a shower before breakfast. Today, though, he woke up and could tell it was much later than he normally woke. Phil was already awake, and his eyes turned to Technoblade when he moved to sit up.

“Good morning,” Phil said, his eyes warm and gentle.

Technoblade rubbed his eyes and glanced over at him. “Hi?” he said, infusing a question into the greeting.

Phil just smiled at him. “Happy Birthday, Tech.”

Technoblade just squinted at him. Phil was doing one of his weird things, wasn’t he? It was far too early for whatever weird thing Phil was doing. “Huh?”

Phil just smiled wider and walked over to sit on the edge of his bed. “I said, happy birthday,” he said as though saying the phrase again would make it make more sense. “It’s your birthday, or well, I’m not sure of the exact date, but you said you’d turned 14 a little before we met, so I just subtracted two weeks and called it good. You’re 15 years-old now.”

“Okay,” he said. “And?”

“And,” Phil said, “we celebrate birthdays in this train car.”

“What?”

“I’ll show you,” Phil promised. “Go get ready for the day, and I’ll set up, yeah?”

“Fine,” Technoblade agreed. Despite being able to sleep a bit later today, he still was reluctant to drag himself out of the warm and soft pile of blankets.

“What do you want for breakfast?” Phil asked.

Technoblade shrugged, but that was apparently not enough of an answer for Phil today because he started listing off options.

“Eggs and toast, pancakes, French toast, that cereal you like, the...”

“Yes.”

“Which...”

“Yes, Phil,” Technoblade said, already half out of the door to walk to the train car with the shower. Usually, he was fairly quick about his showers, doing everything needed as efficiently as possible, but if Phil was going to be weird, Techno was going to take a bit of extra time in the shower to let him settle down.

This might have been a mistake, because apparently him taking a while in the shower gave Phil a chance to destroy the main train car. Of course, Phil had probably already planned this destruction, considering Techno did not know what use the colorful long, thin, pieces of paper and matching wrongly shaped balls now attached to the walls could have other than making a mess of their living area.

Phil was currently at the kitchen area cooking something. “I’m making French toast,” he informed Technoblade when he approached, “and eggs.”

To Technoblade’s confusion, when he went to try to help like he usually did, Phil gently pushed him away and told him to go sit down instead.

A plate of food was set down in Technoblade’s lap a few minutes later, the French toast covered in strawberries and maple syrup and the eggs cooked the way Technoblade most liked them.

They ate side by side, sharing Technoblade’s bed as they often did. Technoblade was starting to wonder if Phil was okay because he was acting very strange and also looked like he might be sick to his stomach.

Technoblade ate slowly, studying him. What did Phil usually do when he thought Technoblade was acting strange? “Are you okay?” he asked Phil.

“I’m fine,” Phil said. His fingers tapped against his thigh. “It’s just your birthday.”

“You have said.”

“It’s exciting,” he said. Was that expression ‘excitement,’ Technoblade wondered.

“Okay,” Technoblade replied, taking another bite of eggs.

They finished up breakfast quickly and Phil took the plates to their sink to wash later. “Would you like me to braid your hair for you today?” Phil asked and Technoblade nodded, of course. Since they were already seated on the bed, he didn’t make Technoblade move to a chair and instead just grabbed the hairbrush from a nearby table and a hair tie. Technoblade shifted, turning to offer him his back and soon he felt the familiar sensation of the brush running through his hair. “I’ve actually been looking up how to do a different type of braid called a French rope braid. Do you mind if I try that?”

“That’s fine,” Technoblade answered, his eyes having already slipped closed. He really did not care too much about how the braid looked at the end. He barely even cared that it was functional if he was being honest. What he found he cared about a lot more was the careful way Phil pulled the brush through his still slightly damp hair to release any tangles before humming and getting up to get the blow dryer to dry it the rest of the way. Once he was satisfied it was dry and untangled, he reached forward to start sectioning the hair with warm, gentle fingers. He was explaining the new braid, Technoblade knew, but he didn’t really care. If he had to do a braid himself, he’d just do the one he already knew. His brain power was much more useful dedicated to absorbing the gentle tugs that

never went anywhere near smarting and the way calloused fingertips brushed his skull as Phil grabbed new pieces of hair to bring into the braid.

The skin where hair attached to the head was sensitive, Technoblade knew very well. He'd been tugged around by hair much shorter than it was now, had had it pulled in fights. He'd had it shorn off with razors so sharp that the skin under it prickled with blood. He'd never thought the sensitivity could be used for something nice until Phil had reached out and touched the strands with soft and nimble fingers. The skin was sensitive, but when treated kindly there was no pain, just a tingling warmth that pressed down on Technoblade's shoulders and eyelids making him want to slump forward into sleep. It was a nice thing. Technoblade couldn't quite understand the how and the why still, but it was nice.

The braid took a little bit longer than usual since Phil's fingers were unused to the method and he had to redo parts. Technoblade was pleased by this fact. Eventually, though, he finished up the braid and started putting on a hair elastic.

"Can you lift your chin a bit for me?" Phil asked, and Technoblade did without question. "I'm going to put my hands near the front of your neck briefly," he warned.

"Okay," Technoblade agreed. He felt Phil shift on the bed, and something settled on the top of his head before Phil's hand pulled something down past his nose and under his chin. It snapped into place there, putting a small amount of pressure under his chin to hold the thing on his head. Technoblade blinked and slowly put a hand up to touch whatever was sitting on top of his head. "What is this?" he asked upon touching the flimsily built cone shape.

"It's a birthday hat," Phil said.

The hand touching this 'birthday hat' slowly fell into his lap. "Why?" he asked.

Phil just laughed at him like he was the one being ridiculous. "Alright, you have three presents, and we'll start with the biggest one first. I'll let you play around with it because I'm sure you'll want to use it right away, and then after lunch, I'll give you the second one. I'm going to pick you up pizza from town to try as a treat for dinner and then you get the last present."

That all sounded like a lot, but if it made Phil happy, he could deal with it. "Sure," he said.

Phil had apparently left the present in a different area, because he left Technoblade in the train car for a few minutes to get it. He came back with a box covered in colorful paper that Technoblade was apparently expected to unwrap. He did not understand why Phil was making such a fuss. He gave Technoblade a present every time he came back from town. It was usually something Technoblade looked at for a couple of minutes and then put on one of the shelves.

Still, he went to unwrap and then open the box and peaked inside. There was another rectangular box as well as a couple of much flatter square box.

"It's a Nintendo 3DS," Phil told him, proudly. "It's a gaming system. Like the phone games, but with a bit more to do. I used to have a Nintendo when they were a lot bigger than this. I got some games for you too."

Technoblade studied the contents, stunned for a long moment.

"I hope you don't mind, but I went ahead and opened the Nintendo box so I could charge it. That way you could play something right away. I'd suggest Mario, mostly because that's the only one of these

games I already know something about.”

Oh. Oh, okay, he understood the reason for the big presentation and the weird paper and Phil’s excitement now. This was not just a normal present.

“Want to play with it?” Phil asked. Technoblade nodded, mute. Phil reached into the box and pulled out the bigger of the boxes. “I went ahead and messed around with it a bit, so I know the controls, here.” He slipped a black device that looked a bit like the DVD player into Technoblade’s hand. Phil proceeded to walk him through how to turn the device on and what the buttons did, and then opened the ‘Mario’ game for him, inserting it into the slot.

It was better than the phone games. It took him a bit to get a handle on the premise and controls, but once he did, it was entrancing. It started out rather simple but seemed to always have some new mechanic to add as he completed tasks, all without changing the main premise of trying to get to the end of a 2-D map.

Phil, finally had to make him put it down to eat lunch by promising he could go back to it later. Though, directly after lunch it was time for the second present. It was a few different sets of DVDs wrapped individually in paper, including one television series called “Clash of the Gods” as well as a movie about Egyptian Mythology and some more movies that were purely fictional. He ended up watching the first two episodes of “Clash of the Gods” with Phil before going back to playing Mario.

Eventually, Phil left to go pick up ‘pizza’ which was something that Technoblade had never had before. He didn’t really notice him leave, still focused on the game, but he did notice when he came back and presented a box of food. Pizza was... strange, but good. He enjoyed it well enough, but then Phil had another surprise with him which was an ice-cream cake. It was yet another thing he had never had before. Phil cut the small cake into 6 slices, serving one for each of them and putting the other four away for later in the icebox. While the pizza was good, the ice cream cake was something else entirely and he quickly discovered it was Oreo flavored.

“Alright,” Phil said once he was finished cleaning up. “One more birthday present, and then you can go back to playing your games or watching your movies,” he said.

Technoblade nodded, eager for whatever it was.

“It...” Phil hesitated. He suddenly seemed stressed. “Isn’t quite the same as the other two presents. It’s not something to do it’s... Well, I hope you like it.”

He reached into a bag he’d brought in with the pizza and the cake and slowly pulled something out, offering it to Technoblade. It was not wrapped like the other presents had been. Instead, it was fully visible as Technoblade took it from him.

It was soft, was the first thing Technoblade realized, like some of the blankets Phil gave him when it was very cold, but even softer. It was off white and light weight. It fit in his hands.

“What is it?” he asked after a moment.

“It’s a stuffed animal,” Phil told him, clearing his throat. “A polar bear one to be specific. You uh, it can go in your bed. It’s just something soft to have. People like to hug them or just touch them because they’re soft. You didn’t have anything like that, so I thought you might like it. You could also keep it on a shelf if you prefer, but it’s mostly made to touch.”

Technoblade stroked a hand across the fuzzy fur, and his hand hit a little black chunk of string that was clearly meant to be a nose. “Thank you,” he said. “I like it.”

“I’m glad,” said Phil with a breath. “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks,” Technoblade said. “Can I play the game again now?”

“Sure,” Phil said, cracking a smile, “but you do have to sleep at some point tonight.”

Technoblade took the stuffed polar bear with him when he went to play on his Nintendo. He settled it onto his lap as he played and Phil did the dishes.

He ended up falling asleep with the gaming console still in his hands and the plushie in his lap.

Chapter End Notes

It's Steve! He's not named Steven yet, but it's Steve! Steven will be a constant in Technoblade's life from now on.

A Totally Normally Breakfast

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

This was probably a stupid idea, Phil acknowledged in his head as he finished Techno's braid for the day. Honestly, the ideas Phil's brain came up with sometimes while just looking at Technoblade existing were probably going to get him or someone else killed one of these days.

About a week ago, he'd been watching as Technoblade sat playing one of his games in the afternoon. It was a voice acted game and Phil could hear the group of three characters talking back in forth as the story took place. Suddenly, the thought 'Techno needs friends' rose unbidden in Phil's mind. This had quickly been amended to the more realistic, but still not particularly reasonable given the circumstances, 'he needs human interaction of any form whatsoever with someone not me.'

There were, of course, many obvious problems with any solution to this issue Phil might come up with. First, both Phil and Techno were on the run from the law. Techno had escaped his own execution. True, it had been months ago now, and the search for them had died down a bit. Plus, Techno had physically changed a good amount since the last time he was plastered all over the news. He'd grown a few inches and bulked up, plus his hair was longer and cleaner. Yet, still, both of them going into public together ran a risk.

Second, Techno had been docile in prison and with Phil, but the fact was he had gone on an unstoppable murder spree the last time he'd been in public. Phil wasn't sure if the change in his behavior had to do with the suppression cuff still on his wrist or not. However, he felt it wasn't considering the behavior change had been before Phil had put it on. Which meant Phil didn't know what had set off the rampage or if something could trigger him to start trying to attack people out of nowhere when put into a new environment.

Third, Techno was, well, he sometimes, once in a while he'd... The kid was weird. Phil was used to it. He found it endearing a lot of the time. Techno didn't understand the world and was trying to slowly figure it out, but he often just didn't know how life worked. It wasn't his fault, but Phil could only imagine what would happen if he put him in front of normal everyday people in a new environment.

Yet, despite these very good arguments against taking Technoblade out in public ever, the thought persisted. And realistically, what was Phil supposed to do? Keep the fifteen-year-old boy locked in a box for the rest of his life? Literally isolate him from all human contact but Phil? What was the point of saving him from execution then?

So, Phil had started to think of the best ways to take Techno out in public but minimize the risks. They wouldn't go to the city where there were thousands of people milling about, and it would be easy to overwhelm him. They'd go to a smaller town, preferably one far enough from the city that they hadn't been as concerned about the murderous rampage a year ago. A Monday during the school year in the mid-morning would be best. Situations where he could be around people, but not have to talk to many at a time. Plus, something that was actually nice and would give a positive experience.

He'd come up with a list of possible things they could do and then approached Technoblade. In the end, he'd chosen two things from the list. One had been the familiar experience of being fed, especially when promised it would be good food. Then with a bit of probing, he'd chosen something

he was not as familiar with, but was interested in: animals. Easy enough. Phil would find a restaurant in a small town and a barn that did personal tours.

Then, Phil had made a couple of calls with more than a couple of lies to set everything up. He'd rented a car and had driven it to the trainyard last night planning to start the hour drive this morning.

Techno was... skeptical maybe. He'd seemed pleased enough by the plans before, but he was grumpy this morning with his routine being disturbed. The only saving grace was that Phil had made him fully charge his Nintendo the night before, and he was anticipating an hour of uninterrupted screen time. Or... at least he was until he saw the car they were going to be riding in.

He was clearly even more skeptical of the car, learily studying it from the outside and then looking at Phil consideringly.

"Have you never been in a car before?" Phil asked, surprised, though he probably should not have been at this point.

Techno shook his head.

"Well, they may seem a bit scary, but they're perfectly safe."

"One hit me once," he said, with his nose scrunched up in distaste.

"Ah," Phil said. "Well, that would have hurt, I'm sure. Uh, you won't run into that problem from the inside of one though." He reached to open the passenger side door. Techno peered at the interior, looked back at Phil, and then looked in again. Phil patted the seat. "This one even has heated seats."

"Heated seats?" he asked.

"There's a button that makes the seat warm up, kind of like the hotplate, but not as hot. It won't burn you. It'll just be warm. Here, try it."

Techno gave him a suspicious look.

"No moving the car yet," Phil promised. "Just sitting there."

Techno huffed out a breath but did get into the car. Phil reached past him to put the keys in the ignition and then pressed the button that would turn on the passenger side's heated seats. He stood outside of the passenger side's open door for a while as Techno settled in.

"You can turn on the radio if you like. It's that button there."

Techno reached forward to turn on the radio. Some rock song started playing through the speakers.

Phil waited about a song and a half before speaking again. "You know it's getting kind of cold out here..."

Techno gave a put-upon sigh suddenly very much sounding like the 15-year-old he was. "Fine, Phil. We can go."

Phil chuckled, feeling the urge to ruffle his hair a bit, but he refrained himself because it would make him uncomfortable and would also mess up the braid Phil just did. "Alright," he said. "Let's get on the road."

Techno still wasn't quite comfortable with being in a car, that was clear. He would tense at every bump and turn, and didn't even touch his Nintendo, instead sitting silently with his eyes wide open and looking slightly nauseous. He didn't complain, but he also didn't calm down the entire way there, breathing out a very relieved sigh when Phil confirmed that they were at their destination.

"That is driving?" Technoblade asked.

"Yep," Phil confirmed. "I know it can be scary, but you're perfectly safe. Trust me."

"Okay..."

"Well," Phil said. This was very possibly about to go entirely wrong, but he couldn't back out now. "How about we go get some breakfast or, well, more brunch?"

Technoblade nodded and undid his seatbelt. Phil had mostly prepared him for the restaurant experience, explaining that there would be people around and he'd have to talk to at least the waitress, but he was clearly a bit nervous. Phil kept a close eye on him as they walked from the parking lot to the little restaurant. Luckily, there were no signs of Techno looking freaked out or murderous as they entered the front and were greeted by a waitress. He looked maybe a bit out of sorts, but mostly just looked like an awkward teenager.

"Sit wherever you like. I'll be with you folks in a minute," the waitress said, and Phil nodded. He led Techno to the booth farthest away from the entrance. He slid into the booth, a weird expression crossing his face, but nothing too out of the ordinary. Phil smiled at him, still watching for any negative reaction.

The waitress came over after about a minute with menus which she sat in front of them, and it all went surprisingly normal despite how much Phil had stressed out about it. Phil had already told Technoblade what was expected of him at a restaurant, and they had discussed drink options beforehand. He glanced up at the waitress when she asked for their drink orders and ordered tea as though he'd done it a hundred times before. First direct interaction with another human being complete. And no one died.

"So," Phil said once the waitress left. "What do you think?"

"The seats are a strange material," Techno commented with a frown. He put a hand on the seat next to him. "It is sticky. Was juice spilled on it?"

"Nope," Phil said with a half-smile. "That's just the material they use."

"Why?" Techno asked, flummoxed.

Phil shrugged. "I think it's easier to clean," he said.

Techno frowned at the seat. "Or people simply assume it is clean because they can't tell that juice was spilt on it."

Phil rolled his eyes fondly and picked up his menu. Obviously, Techno wouldn't be able to read his menu, so Phil glanced at it for a moment before speaking. "They're still serving breakfast food at the moment. It's pretty standard stuff. Pancakes, plates with eggs and some sort of breakfast meat, omelets. They have a breakfast burger too apparently if you want that."

"Pancakes," Techno said without hesitation.

Phil sighed. "Are you saying that because you want pancakes or because it was the first option out of my mouth?"

Techno shrugged. "Pancakes."

Well at least the pancakes were a good choice. They had 5 different types of fancy syrups on the table, so they were probably good ones. "It comes with a side of breakfast meat too: sausage, bacon, or ham."

"Sausage," Techno replied. Phil didn't bother arguing with him this time.

The waitress came back with their drinks then and took out a pad of paper to take their order. "What would you like?" she asked Phil.

"You order first, Tech," Phil said.

"Pancakes," Techno said, "with the sausage. Please."

"Of course," she said, smiling at him. She seemed to take this as a normal interaction. That was good.

"I'll have the same," Phil said when she turned to him, having forgotten to think about his own breakfast choice. He handed her both menus and she walked back towards the window to the kitchen.

She was out of earshot before Techno spoke again. "There is a dead fish pinned to a board above your head."

Phil glanced up to see a mounted bass on the wall next to him. "So, there is."

"Why?"

"I'd imagine the owners like fishing," Phil said.

"Why didn't they cook it?" Technoblade asked.

"I don't know. They must have just not wanted to."

"They own a restaurant, Phil."

"I... yeah, that's a good point," Phil said.

Satisfied with Phil's concession that it was odd, Techno let his eyes wander more. "Why do they have a framed photograph of their own restaurant inside their restaurant?"

The never-ending stream of 'why's, at least, was familiar at this point.

Chapter End Notes

(This is titled 'Yaaas Phil. Take the Feral Child Out in Public.' in my documents.)

Also, a reminder. Phil cannot drive. He cannot. Remember that he's banned from driving in One More Step Out of the Pit? He wasn't any better in this timeline. Poor Techno won't realize you're

not supposed to be that scared of cars for so long. XD



[from Imgflip Meme Generator](https://imgflip.com)

Six Horses in a Barn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil acted strangely from the moment they entered the ‘restaurant’ until they received their food. He appeared constantly on edge as though expecting an attack. This was fair. Afterall, Technoblade himself half expected an attack, but Phil had been the one to assure him that if he followed the instructions given to him, nothing would go wrong. Perhaps he was worried Technoblade would not follow the instructions.

The instructions were, however, very easy to fulfill and nothing had gone wrong. The ‘waitress’ had asked them what they wanted to drink and had gone and gotten them the drinks. Then, she had asked them what they wanted to eat and Technoblade had watched her walk over to tell the people in the kitchen what they wanted. Now they were waiting. It was exactly what Technoblade had been informed happened at restaurants; he wasn’t sure why Phil seemed stressed.

The waitress came by once to refill their drinks, but she didn’t even try to strike up a conversation like Phil had warmed him some waitresses might. That was quite relieving as he had no idea what he would talk to a stranger about. Eventually, the waitress brought them plates of food and set them down in front of them. The food was identifiable as pancakes; however, they were bigger, thicker, and less lumpy than the ones he was used to.

Techno tilted his head. “Are these what pancakes are *supposed* to look like, Phil?”

Technoblade was surprised when the waitress let out a short chuckle at his words.

He looked over at Phil who had a strange expression on his face. “I am working with limited resources,” Phil said. The man’s finger flicked the wadded-up straw wrapper that had been discarded near his hand. It hit Techno in the forehead and harmlessly fell into his lap. Techno narrowed his eyes at the man and Phil smiled back, amused.

“Ah,” Techno said. “The lumps in yours are not intentional then?”

Phil also narrowed his eyes, but one side of his mouth was curling up. “No, Tech,” he said, tone as soft as it always was on that shortened form of his name. “The lumps are not intentional.”

“Interesting.”

“Just eat your pancakes,” Phil said with a headshake and a laugh. He reached to push a few short bottles that had been on the table towards Techno. “They have 5 different types of syrup for you to also like better than what I provide you.”

The waitress asked if they needed anything else while Technoblade studied the bottles in front of him. When Phil told her they didn’t, she left them alone.

“There are multiple types of syrup?” Techno asked once she was gone.

Phil returned his attention back to Techno. “Yep,” he said. “They have the basic plain maple, apricot, orange maple, and blackberry, but I think you’d like the blueberry the most.” He tapped his finger on

each of the bottles as he said their names. “You can try a bit of all of them though and decide for yourself.”

Techno nodded and reached for the blueberry one first. He tried all of the flavors and found that Phil was right. He did like the blueberry best, but he also was a fan of the orange maple and ended up using both on his pancakes. Phil used mostly normal maple syrup with a bit of the apricot.

“Like it?” Phil asked once Techno finished his pancakes. He’d been much calmer while eating than he’d been while waiting for the food. Techno nodded. “Good,” he said. “I’m glad.” He checked his watch. “We should probably be going soon though. We have an appointment.”

Techno nodded and got to his feet. They stopped by the counter so Phil could pay for the food and then left the restaurant.

Oh right, Technoblade thought once they stepped outside. The car. He did not understand how people liked riding in cars. Being thrown around in one all morning had been horrible. He’d felt like he was going to die multiple times, and he knew what that felt like. His elbow still hurt from where he’d banged it against the center console on a particularly sharp turn.

“I know,” Phil said with a chuckle after seeing him glare at the car, “but it’s fine. I promise. You’ll get used to it.”

Technoblade sighed. He couldn’t see how, but he trusted Phil. Reluctantly, he climbed into the car and strapped himself in once more.

Luckily, this car ride was shorter, though they hit a road made of rocks that made the car practically vibrate as it moved. Who had come up with the idea to use loose rocks to make a road? Yet, Phil seemed undisturbed by the way the car violently shuddered as he sped down the irrationally constructed road with only one hand on the wheel. He didn’t even seem concerned when the wheels of the car went off the side of the road slightly.

Technoblade was very relieved when the car finally came to a halt and the world stopped bouncing. He’d been beginning to regret the pancakes.

Phil had stopped outside a large white house standing alone, though there were other big red and silver buildings standing behind it. Farm, Techno assumed from what he’d been told about what they’d be doing today. He was honestly a bit more nervous about the farm than he’d been about the restaurant. Other than the strange décor and the waitress talking to him, the experience of eating food with Phil was not novel. He was not quite as sure about what was expected of him at a farm however, and that was not helped by the fact that Phil wasn’t 100% sure how it would go himself.

“You remember what to say if anyone asks?” Phil checked.

Technoblade nodded. “I am a recent foster child. I am being homeschooled because of lack of proper education in previous homes. We are here because I’ve never been to a barn. You also wanted to get me out of the house a bit more than you have been ‘which isn’t actually too much of a lie now that I think about it.’”

Phil closed his eyes briefly. “Please don’t repeat that last part in front of the people we’re lying to.”

“Okay,” Technoblade agreed with a shrug.

Phil opened his eyes again and looked over at Techno. "I'll be there the entire time, so if anything goes wrong or you feel uncomfortable, just let me know."

That made Techno feel a bit better. He could trust Phil. Even if something were to go wrong, Phil would help him out of it. He'd proven that already. "Of course, Phil."

"Alright," Phil said with a nervous breath. "Let's go then."

Technoblade nodded and removed his seatbelt to get out of the car. He and Phil started walking towards the house when the front door opened. There was a sudden shriek of, "Shi! No! Bea!" and then a blur of black and white was hurtling out of the door and directly towards Technoblade. Phil just managed to get between him and the blur before it made impact and grabbed the collar around its neck to hold it back a bit.

A dog, Technoblade realized when it came to enough of a halt that he was able to process its features. He'd seen some dogs before in that brief time hiding in alleyways on the surface before Phil, but all of those had seemed as leery of him as he'd been of them. This dog, however, was not leery at all. It was white and black speckled with bright blue eyes, a fluffy tail, and a body that came up to about Technoblade's knees. It was straining against Phil's hold, but it didn't seem to be attacking; its teeth were not bared even as its mouth opened and it made a high pitched barking sound.

"Sorry about her," the woman who had rushed over said. She grabbed the dog's collar from Phil. "She gets excited sometimes."

Techno looked at the dog. It was still trying desperately to reach him. "What does she want?" he asked cautiously.

"She just wants to say hi," the woman said, "and to be pet because she's a spoiled brat."

Techno met eyes with the dog briefly. Its tail wagged back and forth rapidly. "Hello," he said.

"You can pet her if you'd like," the woman said, sounding amused. "She's friendly. If you scratch her ears, you'll be her best friend forever."

Technoblade glanced at Phil. "Go ahead," he said. "Only if you want to."

Techno nodded and cautiously crouched to be level with the dog before extending a hand towards her. Her tail started whipped back and forth faster and faster the closer his hand got. She pressed her nose against it the second it was in range and sniffed at him enthusiastically before darting out a tongue to lick him. Technoblade wasn't sure what to make of a creature licking him, but he didn't draw back. Instead, he recalled the woman's advice and reached up to scratch behind her ears softly. She leaned heavily into the touch and so he scratched a bit harder and also reached up with the hand that had been hanging uselessly at his side to pet her other ear.

At some point, the woman let go of the dog and Techno ended up sitting on the ground with the dog half in his lap. He heard the woman speak to Phil, introducing herself as Deedee, but most of their conversation was just talking about how their days had been which Techno tuned out.

After they'd talked for a bit, Phil bent down next to him to also pet the dog. She seemed very pleased by this development. "She seems to like you," Phil said softly.

"Bea's always been a good judge of character," Deedee commented. Bea looked back at the mention of her name, tail wagging. "Bea," Deedee said again. "You want to help show our guests around."

Bea barked her assent, stepping off of Technoblade to rub against her owner's leg.

"What do you want to see first?" Deedee asked as Technoblade got to his feet.

Technoblade shrugged. "I don't know," he said.

"Hmm," she said. "Well, we can start with the chicken coup."

Deedee proceeded to take them around to look at all of the animals on her farm. She apparently ran it with her father, Kurtis, who also joined them on the tour of the large barn. They had a lot of animals, at least Technoblade assumed. He didn't know how many animals were typically on a farm. They both knew a lot about animals. Kurtis, in particular, tended to rattle off facts about each animal they met, both about the species and about the specific animals themselves. He knew each animal's favorite food and told Techno which ones were 'lazy' and which one's were 'sassy' and which ones were 'evil incarnate.' Techno stored all of these facts away in his head even if he didn't know when he'd ever find a need to use them.

He was allowed to touch some of the animals, and they were all soft, though in different ways. He even ended up petting a cat that apparently no one else had been able to touch. The cat was scared away by Bea when she tried to sniff at it.

The animals he ended up spending the most time with were the horses. Kurtis noticed him giving them more attention than the other animals and he and Deedee let him linger around them longer. He met six horses, though apparently there were a couple more out in the pasture. They were big and turned their heads to peer at him with intelligent eyes, though he had to modify just how smart he thought they were when one curiously tried to snack on his hair like it was a new fancy brand of hay.

Kurtis even brought out different brushes and treats for the horses and let Techno groom and feed one of them.

"You have a way with animals, kid," Kurtis told him as he watched Techno brush the black and white paint horse. "If you ever want to learn to ride, we do lessons in the spring."

"Ride?" Techno asked, confused. "The horse?"

"Yes," Kurtis said.

"I didn't know people rode horses," Techno said, turning to look at the horse once more. They were certainly big enough, he supposed. It just hadn't crossed his mind.

"It's a lot of fun," Deedee said. "We have a class for kids, but also one for young adult and adult beginners."

Techno didn't know how to respond, so he simply went back to petting the horse.

"We'll talk about it at home," Phil said. Techno tilted his head to look at him, but Phil just smiled back.

They let him stay with the horses for a bit longer, but then they went to finish up the farm tour. Technoblade was reluctant to leave until Phil mentioned not wanting to drive home in the dark. Technoblade did not want to know how much worse riding in a car in the dark would be, so he was willing to give Bea a few goodbye pets and get into the car.

“You seemed to like the farm,” Phil commented as they pulled away.

“Yes,” Technoblade agreed.

“We’ll go back there sometime,” Phil promised. “Maybe even think about those riding lessons.”

Riding a horse certainly sounded better than riding in a car, Technoblade thought, but he was biased.

Chapter End Notes

Something Phil unironically buys Technoblade when he's starting public school for the first time. Technoblade unironically uses them everyday.



He's 22. He doesn't care what 8-year-olds say about his horse obsession, and they're too scared to tell it to his face anyway.

Peaches: Sweet and Sharp

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Things changed a lot in the year that Technoblade was 15. Most of the winter was the two of them snowed into their little group of train cars, which Phil had thankfully had the forethought to insulate well. They spent most of their time doing nothing but talking, Techno even growing bored of playing his games by himself sometimes and stopping to talk to Phil or invite him to play as well.

They spoke of all sorts of things, though Techno still tended to be the one who asked questions and Phil tended to be the one to answer. However, sometimes Techno would start to talk about something in his games or an interesting fact he'd learned and could speak for hours at a time. He felt he finally got to know Techno as a person then even as Techno was still learning to be one himself. There were times when he'd start talking while Phil was braiding his hair and Phil would get so distracted by just listening to him that he forgot what he was doing, and they'd end up sitting there for far longer than usual talking with Phil's hands in his hair.

Techno also began to develop a much stronger personality which up until then Phil had only seen in small flashes. He began to learn the art of dry, sarcastic, humor, of which, Phil was the only available victim to practice on. He didn't mind too much though. In truth the teasing barbs tended to warm him in ways the heating system in the train car could not.

In the spring, he kept his promise to take Techno back to the farm and he ended up taking horse riding lessons with a small group of teenagers around his age. He didn't seem to connect well with any of them, mostly only talking to the adults around the farm and even those discussions were brief. Kurtis offered to let him pay off the group lessons as well as some bonus private ones by working on the farm. Though Phil could easily pay for them, and Kurtis was certainly aware of that fact considering he'd paid for a private tour in the fall, he still accepted because he knew Techno would like it.

He loved working with the animals, never flinching from any of the grosser aspects of farm work and relishing in all of the fun parts. He started eating more and began putting on muscle with the manual labor. Along with the few inches he gained in height, this made Phil sigh in relief. He looked nothing like the small scrawny figure with dull eyes he'd been when the murder spree took place. It made it less likely they'd be recognized, though the risk was not 0. Phil himself was high profile and it wouldn't be too hard to connect the dots.

Spring turned to summer, and they still visited the farm frequently, though the group riding lessons had long stopped. Deedee started handing him cash at the end of his workdays to his confusion. Considering he had almost no use for money, most of it went to more video games and movies at Phil's urging. Phil started writing down lists of the available games and movies for him to choose from himself since it was his money, and he quickly started to develop preferences even if he never explicitly said them out loud.

There was a small orchard on the farm with peach trees which they'd started to harvest in earnest in late July. Techno had helped with canning the fruits for the winter the week before and they'd been given an entire box of the cans to take home. They'd stored most of them away for the winter months even though Techno seemed displeased he couldn't eat them all immediately.

Today, Phil smiled at Techno as he walked out of the train car. Phil was sitting with a cup of coffee on their makeshift porch watching the sunrise when he stumbled out looking groggier than usual. Phil

was startled by an elbow settling on the top of his head, blinking up at Techno in confusion.

“You’re short,” he proclaimed. Ah. Of course. Phil didn’t know what else he expected.

“I’m literally sitting down!”

“Stand up then,” he said, amused.

Phil just frowned at him. It was true that Techno had grown taller than him over the summer. The first time Techno had noted this fact, he’d simply been making a comment, but apparently Phil’s reaction had been *funny* and now Phil was never going to hear the end of it.

“Good morning, Phil,” Phil mumbled into his coffee. “How are you today, Phil? Did you sleep well, Phil?”

Techno ignored him entirely. “You didn’t make me any?” he asked, looking at Phil’s coffee cup.

“I did, actually,” Phil said with an eyeroll. “I didn’t know when you’d be up, so I left it in the pot.”

He huffed in acknowledgement.

“The appropriate response is ‘thank you,’” Phil said watching him walk back into the train car and over to the coffee pot.

“You’ll get your ‘thankyou’ when the coffee is in my hand,” Techno said, waving him off.

“Sassy little shit,” Phil grumbled with a headshake. He watched Techno grab a mug from the shelf and set it on the counter next to the coffee before grabbing the coffee pot with the same hand he’d used to get the mug and moving to slowly pour coffee into it. A bit splashed over the side and onto the table as he poured. He set down the pot and grabbed a nearby rag to wipe up the mess before picking up the mug. His left hand had never moved.

Phil’s eyes tracked him as he walked back over to the porch. He was paler than normal, Phil noticed when he was paying attention and was wearing a hoodie, not particularly unusual for him even in the summer, with long sleeves. The sleeve completely covered his left hand, his dominant hand.

“Is something wrong with your hand?” Phil asked.

“No,” Techno said firmly and a bit too quickly.

Phil cocked his head to the side. “Can I see your left hand then?” he asked slowly.

“No,” Techno said again.

“Tech-”

Techno got up and walked away.

Phil blinked at his retreating form for a moment before rising to his own feet to follow. “Tell me what’s wrong,” Phil insisted.

“Nothing,” Techno said.

“That’s obviously not true.”

“It’s none of your businesses.”

“You’ll find it is actually my business,” Phil said.

Techno turned around and his eyes were blazing with anger and defensiveness. For a moment, Phil tensed in expectation for a physical confrontation, but it didn’t come. “Fuck off.”

Phil blinked, surprised. He was pretty sure Techno had never cursed in front of him. He wondered where he’d even learned that from before remembering that he himself probably had let one slip a time or two in the past year and a bit. “No,” Phil said coolly. “Show me your hand.”

He did not.

Phil came out of this particular argument hours later, emotionally exhausted, and with a newfound awareness that Technoblade could be the most stubborn person on the planet when he chose to be so. Phil had attempted every tactic he could think of, and he wouldn’t budge. Not even with bribery which was the strategy that had always worked with him in the past.

Unfortunately for Techno, Phil’s care for his wellbeing proved to be stronger. The end of the argument came down to pure exhaustion. Techno finally relented, still angry, still glaring, but he allowed himself to be led back into the train car for Phil to take a look at his hand.

It had been wrapped in tight bandages, impressively neat for him using his nondominant hand to apply them, and hidden carefully under his hoodie sleeve as Phil had expected. There was a bit of blood on the bandages, though it had been wrapped a few times, so it was hard to tell how much blood there was until he took it off.

“Holy shit,” was all Phil could say when he unwrapped the bandages. There was a deep, jagged cut across his palm that was still oozing blood even though the wound looked somewhat old. Old enough that the skin around it was puffed up red and there was yellow puss oozing out along with the blood.

“Where did you get this?” Phil asked.

“Trying to open a peach jar,” Techno replied stiffly.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Phil asked. There was no response. It looked like it was taking the effort of every muscle in his body to sit still in front of him. The eyes that had been burning embers during their row were blank now, staring somewhere over Phil’s shoulder. It was a familiar expression on his face; Phil had hoped to never see it again. “Oh, Tech,” Phil said closing his eyes. He gathered himself with a breath and then opened his eyes again. “It’s infected,” he told him even though he didn’t think he’d get a response.

He’d had a good amount of medical training as a superhero. In most circumstances he would have taken him to the hospital regardless with an infected wound like that, but he should be able to treat him on his own. If it had gone on for longer... he wasn’t sure. He shoved that thought away for the moment and grabbed the medical kit.

Techno seemed to be back at least a little when Phil returned with the medical kit. He was holding the injured hand close to himself, defensively. Phil didn’t try to reach for it yet. “It’s pretty infected,” Phil told him.

“I tried to keep it clean.”

"I'm sure you did," Phil said, "but sometimes you need more than what you were working with." He paused. "The, uh, skin has started to grow over the infected area," he said. "I'm probably going to have to cut it open to drain the infection."

Techno looked at him in trepidation.

"I'm sorry," Phil said, "we have to, or it could get a lot worse. You'll get sick." He already was sick a little, probably. He was pale and likely had a fever.

"It's fine," Techno said, but clearly it wasn't. "Just do whatever." He shoved the hand at Phil.

Phil took a breath and took the hand with gentle fingers. Techno was as still as a statue, though Phil would swear he could hear his heartbeat beating an erratic pattern. He worked as quickly and as carefully as he could and then backed off as soon as the wound was properly wrapped, hoping maybe the horrible tension in his frame would relax if Phil wasn't touching him anymore. He washed up and then set a glass of water next to him along with two antibiotic pills. "Take those, okay?" he said, and then moved over to the kitchen area.

Techno still had his coffee, and it was probably still warm enough, but Phil needed something to do with his hands, so he grabbed some of the hot chocolate mix from the shelf and started to make him some. He heard Techno move to take the pills after a minute.

He settled the hot chocolate on the table next to him once it was done. "You should rest for the next couple of days," Phil said, taking a seat on his own bed across the way.

"Okay," Techno agreed.

"I'm sorry," Phil said after almost a full minute.

Techno glanced up at him. "You didn't harm me."

"I must have," Phil said.

"No," Techno said simply.

"You hid an injury from me," Phil said. "I must have done something wrong."

"It was inconsequential."

"It wasn't actually," Phil snapped, but then bit his tongue. "How often have you done this?" he asked, though it was more of a rhetorical question. "How often have you been hurt, and I haven't even known?"

There was no answer. He looked into his hot chocolate and that was enough of an answer for Phil.

Chapter End Notes

You do not understand how unbelievably angry Techno is and how unbearably pleased Phil is when Wilbur ends up taller than Techno. Phil doesn't even care that he's the shortest. He takes great joy in the fact that Techno is not the tallest. There are many jokes about him joining the short people squad.

Also, Techno gets a big uno reverse on that hiding injuries thing in the future via Tommy. L.

Seven Exhibits

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Technoblade was drawn awake by the smell of coffee in the train car. He sat up and glanced over at Phil who was sitting on one of the chairs and peering at him rather intensely. Techno furrowed his brow as Phil smiled.

“Good morning,” Phil greeted. “Do you know what day it is?”

Now, Technoblade was still waking up, so it did take him a moment to remember, but when he did, he felt the urge to roll his eyes. “You have been reminding me every day for the past two weeks of the upcoming, completely arbitrary date, so I am unsure why I wouldn’t at this point.”

Phil just smiled wider, clearly not even giving Techno’s rationality a passing thought. “Happy birthday, Techno,” he said.

“I’m going back to sleep,” Techno grumbled, shoving his face back into his pillow.

“No, you’re not,” Phil sang. “We have plans.”

Techno just groaned as he heard Phil approach but relented and looked up when he was tapped on the head. Phil was holding a cup of coffee out to him.

“Come on,” said Phil. “I know you are going to love the museum, and I want to make sure you have time to see as much of it as possible.”

The things he did for Phil.

He sighed and sat up, accepting the cup of coffee. Phil had introduced him to coffee when they started getting up early to get to the farm in the spring. It was a harshly bitter drink that often had a distinct burning flavor, but despite that, Techno had been growing increasingly fond of it to the point where he felt inclined to ask for it more often than Phil would normally brew it. The caffeine also helped. God did it help.

Getting ready took a bit more an hour. It would have taken less time if Phil hadn’t pulled out a golden colored plastic crown with the number 16 on the front and insisted upon weaving it into Techno’s hair. His hair had grown even more since Phil first started taking care of it. It was approaching his midback now when wet. It made braiding sessions take even longer, but Phil still hadn’t ever turned him away and made him braid his own hair. Phil wanted to do some fancy updo that incorporated the crown, so it took a good amount of time for him to finish. Technoblade didn’t mind even if the weight of the crown felt a bit odd in his hair. Just that, drinking coffee as Phil painstakingly did his hair, would have been enough of a ‘birthday experience’ (as Phil had dubbed the museum trip) for Techno regardless of the fact that it happened every day.

“Ready to go?” Phil asked once he was finished. The plastic crown was not the only unusual item of clothing being worn today. Techno had been given a t-shirt that he’d been informed said ‘No slowing me down! It’s my 16th birthday’ with a snail on it for some reason. He had been forced to wear this. He was also given a white and black jacket with the words ‘Happy birthday’ in pink on the back.

Phil, meanwhile had put on a more intense ‘disguise’ outfit than he usually did when going to the city. Apparently, he’d be more recognizable than Techno who had grown and changed quite a bit in the past two years since the public last saw him. Phil was wearing a bulky, long, green jacket that hid his wings, a white wig so he matched Techno (but he covered it with a green hat anyway), and had put in green contacts.

“Yes, Phil,” Techno replied. They got into the car that Phil had bought when they started driving out to the farm more often. It was worse than the one that he’d originally rented and shook like it was going to break apart when they drove even on flat roads. Phil had claimed it was difficult to buy a good car when on the run from the law. Techno thought he’d probably been swindled. There had been a ‘sleazy’ car salesman in one of the movies Phil had brought him once. Techno figured Phil had met someone like that.

It was the first time Techno had been out in the city since he’d met Phil, discounting when Phil had carried him away to the trainyard, but he’d been shaky from his execution and hadn’t exactly been paying attention then. The city with its tall buildings and busy streets was much less terrifying now that he had more context for the things he saw and was safely with Phil. He’d spent a good... while on the streets before Phil. Time was a bit fuzzy from then. He’d been counting his existence with a different metric, but it was probably at least a week, maybe longer. Maybe up to a month.

Yet, the streets looked different from inside the car. (Though they were terrifying in a different way especially when there were a lot *more* cars than he was used to there being when riding with Phil. There were so many things Phil could hit. There was people Phil could hit. Techno knew what it was like to be hit by a car. It sucked. He really hoped Phil didn’t hit them.)

Things seemed brighter here with Phil despite the driving. The people were calmer and happier. It felt completely different.

Phil parked the car in a large cement ‘parking garage’ in the ‘downtown’ area and they walked the rest of the way to their destination. People didn’t look at Techno the same way as he remembered from those days out here alone, and no one moved to attack him on sight. They *did* look at him, but it was more staring confused for a couple of seconds before turning and moving on. Perhaps that was just how city people were. Kurtis did always say the ‘city folk are strange.’

They stopped at a food stand for a quick breakfast. The man who owned the stand sold three things: pancakes wrapped around sausages on a sticks, bacon and egg sandwiches, and bottles of water. They got two of each item and ate on a bench before walking the rest of the way to the museum.

Phil had given him a brief rundown of what a museum was, though Techno had already had a vague idea since one of his video games involved stealing paintings from an art museum. Phil had apparently been to this museum before and had planned out which exhibits they were going to go to. He’d called ahead and made sure there were tapes available that Techno could listen to since he couldn’t read the signs. They planned to go through six of the bigger exhibits: three in the morning and three after lunch. Each tape apparently took from 45 minutes to an hour and a half to run all the way through.

He hadn’t quite imagined the building Phil led him to, however, when they spoke of this trip. It was huge. The entire building was an off white and it had giant pillars in the front that Phil led him through to get to one of the many, many doors. The inside was just as overwhelmingly large from what he could see beyond the ticket booths that blocked them off from entering for now. Techno had never been in a building this large. It was bigger even than the fighting ring and stand in the Pit which had always seemed so very huge.

He stuck very closely to Phil's side as they made their way towards one of the booths. The man working at the booth looked up as they approached and stared at Techno for a long moment.

"It's his birthday!" Phil informed him. Techno sighed. Was it necessary to tell the general public about the arbitrary day Phil had decided to celebrate?

"I see," the man said biting his lip. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks," Techno replied, blandly.

"I'd assume," he glanced at Techno's crown. One under 18 ticket and one adult?"

"Yes," Phil replied.

The man typed something into the computer next to him. "That'll be £65."

Phil moved to get the money from his wallet. "Prices have gone up a lot since I was here last," Phil commented.

"Yeah," the man said with a slight frown. "It's a recent thing. The city bought the museum a little less than a year ago."

"They did?" Phil asked. "That's odd."

The man just nodded. "We're trying to keep £2 Tuesday for people with student IDs, but Mayor Werner is fighting us on it. The museum hasn't been making enough profit apparently."

"Didn't know that was the main purpose of museums," Phil said, handing the guy some money.

"Yeah, neither did I," the man replied, and handed them their tickets. "Enjoy the museum."

"We will," Phil said. "Thanks!" With that, the man let them through to the museum. "Alright," Phil said once they were inside. "First stop, Ancient Egypt."

Phil knew the museum well enough that he didn't need a map of it. Some things had apparently changed, but the major exhibits were where they had already been. There were stands dotted around that two to three exhibits shared. At these stands, there were different disability aids as well as power aids. Techno saw one kid who couldn't control his ability to glow in the dark be given a paper wristband to help him not glow for 30 minutes in the Space Exhibit. These stands were where Techno was given the audio tour tapes.

They walked through the first three exhibits on Ancient Egypt, Evolution of Mammals, and Space in the morning. It was all incredibly fascinating. He'd already known things about Egypt and space, but seeing the displays were much different than learning about them from movies, and he knew next to nothing about evolution. He learned a lot in a short amount of time about the subjects of the displays.

Techno also quickly learned something new about Phil. The man couldn't walk in the prescribed direction if his life depended on it. Techno relied on the tapes to know what the exhibits were about, and thus closely followed the direction the arrows pointed to keep on track. Phil kept wandering away. He'd get distracted by something and then just... be gone. He never was very far, usually just in the next room or having lingered too long in the last, but it was always annoying to look up and find him not there.

Still, despite that, wandering around the museum was a lot of fun. In spite of his inability to understand why Phil made such a big deal about birthdays, he did have to admit the birthday activity was great.

They had lunch at a little restaurant in the museum. The food was honestly not the best. They put cucumbers on his turkey sandwiches for some unfathomable reason, but it was worth eating there so they could get back to the museum as soon as possible.

After lunch, they went to exhibits on Dinosaurs, Historical Superheroes, and finally Ancient Greece. Phil, despite having panicked every time he realized he wasn't near Techno in the morning, persisted with his wandering behavior into the afternoon.

Which brought Technoblade to nearly the end of the ancient Greece exhibit. Phil was once again nowhere to be seen. With a sigh, Technoblade decided to continue on the tour in the direction they were meant to go, not that he particularly trusted Phil to have gone in that direction. Surely, at some point they'd meet back up.

Yet, eventually, his tape ran out and he could still not find Phil. The arrows had pushed him out of the exhibit back into the hallway they'd entered from but a bit down from the entrance.

He waited for a couple of minutes before getting bored and decided to return the tape to the stand where he'd gotten it. As he did, he noticed the stand also was near a much smaller exhibit that only seemed to take up one room. It had a small sign on it that he, of course, couldn't read.

“Are there tapes for that one?” Techno asked the woman as he handed back the ancient Greece tape.

She glanced over at it. “Oh, yeah, I think,” she said, bending down to retrieve it. “I’m not sure if it’s technically open yet, but it’s no problem if you check it out. It’s supposed to open today for the second anniversary in a couple of weeks. Ah, here.” She handed him another tape.

“Thank you,” Techno said. “If you see a man with a strange hat frantically looking for someone, could you tell him where I went?” Techno asked. “He wandered away.”

“I know who you’re talking about,” she said. Her lips twitched just slightly. “Giant green jacket looking for the birthday boy, right? I’ll point him in your direction.”

He nodded at her in thanks and turned to walk into the new exhibit.

Chapter End Notes

Haha, wonder what the seventh exhibit is about guys. :)

Anyway, if you'd like to know what Techno's outfit is for his birthday...



And, of course, his own addition to the outfit (You have Kurtis to thank for this):



He is also taller than Phil and jacked from working at the farm all summer. He looks like he could be a guard for a mob boss, yet he is dressed as a clown.

We now have fanart for Techno's outfit [OneTwo](#)

Revelations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil really didn't know how this kept happening. It felt like he'd get distracted by something for half a second and when he turned back, Technoblade would be gone. One would think he'd be easy enough to find since he was 6 feet tall with bright white hair and was exploring the museum by following along with a recording. Yet, apparently the order of the recording was just a bit off what the signs said, and so Phil had often gone looking for him in the wrong direction and then had to double back to find him.

He'd been doing his best not to lose him again in the last exhibit they planned to visit about Ancient Greece, but a young girl, probably about 10, had asked him if he knew where the Space Exhibit was as she was supposed to meet her father there after using the restroom. Phil did, of course, know where the Space Exhibit was having been there earlier. He'd told Techno to wait for him, but now that he thought about it, he probably hadn't heard him with the headphones on.

The point was, after taking about 10 seconds to walk to girl to the nearest exit and point her in the direction of the correct exhibit, he'd turned back around to find Technoblade gone without a trace.

He'd wandered around the exhibit aimlessly for a while before finally deciding the best course of action was to leave the exhibit altogether and wait at the main exit. Even if Techno happened to use a different exit, he should still come out somewhere in the hallway where Phil could see him.

He leaned up against the opposite wall, wincing a bit as he crushed his wings in the coat he was wearing. He was there for less than a minute before he noticed the woman standing at the accessibilities counter waving him over.

Confused, he walked over to her. "Yes?" he asked when he made it to the desk.

"You're looking for your son, right?" she asked, and Phil felt himself physically recoil at the word.

"Uh," Phil stammered. "I..."

"Or, um," she said quickly, clearly realizing she'd said something that made him uncomfortable. "The, uh, boy in the birthday outfit with the crown you came in with. You're looking for him?"

Phil nodded mutely, internally shaking himself. He was not allowed to do *that*. Not around Techno. Not on Techno's birthday.

"He asked me to tell you where he went since he lost you," the woman said. "He headed into that exhibit." She gestured at a door off to the side that Phil hadn't noticed before with a small sign that read...

Oh.

Fuck.

He wasn't sure if he thanked her or if he said anything in response really. He was hurrying to the door as quickly as possible.

He ignored all of the signs and pictures on the walls when he stepped into the room; he already had a pretty good idea of what would be on them. What he had no idea about was what the boy in the center of it all (both today physically standing in the middle of the room and then as the main event) was thinking.

He was no longer wearing the headphones. They hung loosely around his neck. Either he'd finished the tape already or had decided not to listen to it anymore. Phil hadn't been listening to the tapes all day, but he could still hear the silence of this particular tape from his spot halfway between the door and where the boy stood.

As Phil watched, Technoblade pushed a little red button to start up the video he was standing in front of him. It was the last in a series of 10 videos taken from various sources like security cameras and police body cams. The one he was watching was from what was a live newscast.

It was a clip Phil recognized. Live, it was a 5 second clip, but later it would be slowed down to fit into 30 seconds both for news stories and in the video Techno was watching now. It had been slowed down so people could comprehend it. It had been plastered all over the news almost 2 years ago. It had sent an already panicking city into overdrive. It was why Phil had gone to meet The Blood God himself.

That's what this exhibit was. It was about The Blood God and the massacre that had taken place about 2 years ago in the city. It was about Technoblade.

The video Technoblade was watching was of himself killing a speedster. Phil hadn't known her personally. She hadn't been new, but she'd been hired after... She'd been hired when Phil hadn't been the most welcoming to co-workers. Her superhero name had been Bullet. Her last moments alive had been caught on live TV.

Phil watched the 30 seconds play out. Technoblade's movements in the slowed down video seemed... so slow on the screen and yet... and yet it's like he knew where she was going long before she did and had ample time to get the old, flimsy iron sword in her path without her realizing it. Phil turned his head away for the last couple of frames.

When he looked back, Technoblade was standing in front of the blank screen, head tilted to the side like it would when he was trying to figure out a particularly difficult puzzle in one of his video games.

Phil took a breath. "Technoblade?" he asked cautiously.

Technoblade tilted his head to look back at him briefly before his hand hit the red button again to replay the video.

"Tech..." Phil said, but he didn't approach. He stayed frozen where he was. The video played through one more time, Technoblade's eyes glued to the screen the whole time.

"Oh," he said once it was finished. "I understand."

Phil didn't... he didn't know what to do. He couldn't tell what Techno was thinking. He didn't know what he meant by what he'd said. The power suppressant cuff was still on his wrist, but Phil didn't know if that was why he'd been docile for the past two years. He'd been confused but calm and curious with Phil. He'd changed so much. Phil *knew* him. Whatever was on the screen right now had been dormant since Phil had knocked the sword out of a 14-year-old's hand.

He had no idea what could wake it up.

Would this wake it up?

Phil approached him cautiously. He reached out a hand to cover the red button, so he didn't try to play it again. Techno just looked at him. He didn't seem murderous. He didn't seem guilty. He didn't even seem confused.

His eyes were different. They were not what they'd been when they'd met sword on sword. They were not what they'd been while he'd been held in Guild custody. They were not even what they had been this morning when he'd allowed Phil to dress him up in a silly little birthday outfit.

"We should go," Phil said softly.

He said nothing, but he did nod and removed the headphones from his neck. He acted... normal, or at least normal for Technoblade, as he handed the tape back to the worker outside. Phil was probably the one who looked like he was acting odd, hovering over him both in worry for him and... just in case.

They made it back to the car without incident and sat through a silent car ride back to the trainyard.

Techno seemed... contemplative, but at least he didn't seem to be twitching to grab a weapon. Phil let himself breathe when they entered the main train car and he was able to close the doors behind them, cutting off the rest of the world.

Techno retreated to his bed area and immediately reached for his Nintendo. Well, at least that was normal.

Phil stood unsure what to do with himself for a long moment while Techno started up a game. "Would you like birthday cake now?" he finally asked. Techno glanced at him and shrugged. "...I'll get us some cake."

He turned to the refrigerator where the cake had been waiting for them. Techno had been very interested in it when Phil had brought it back yesterday, but Phil had insisted it was *birthday* cake and was meant to be consumed on his *birthday*. He had argued that Phil had just guessed his birthday and there would be no issue moving it back one day.

Maybe Phil should have let him have some cake yesterday.

"Phil," Techno said as Phil was doing his best to cut through the cake with a plastic butter knife and shaky hands. It was the first he'd spoken since he'd stared at a blank screen and proclaimed that he 'understood.'

Phil continued to work on cutting the cake. "Yes?"

"You have a superpower, don't you?" he asked. "Like in the one museum exhibit."

"Uh," Phil said. "Yes."

"You're stronger than most people," Techno said, "and you have wings."

"Yep."

Techno seemed to be lost in thought for a few moments. "I think I have a superpower too."

"Oh?" Phil asked. He'd managed to saw off a piece of cake and put it on a plate. His throat felt too dry to want any for himself right now, so he decided not to cut another.

“Yes,” Techno said. When Phil turned, plate of cake in hand, Techno was frowning at his game, his fingers twiddling with the controls. “But we have different powers,” Techno said slowly. “Other people have different powers than us.”

“Generally, yes,” Phil confirmed, sitting next to him on his bed. He set the plate between them. “Though people can have similar powers or even the same powers, especially if they’re related.”

“I don’t think anyone else has my power,” Techno said. “I don’t... I don’t think they understand.” They didn’t. Phil didn’t.

“You could explain it to me,” Phil suggested. “Maybe I’ll understand.” Maybe he could help stop whatever it was that had caused the massacre they’d just seen an exhibit on in the museum. Maybe he could help Techno. He wanted to help.

Techno looked at him and then back at his game. He nodded. Phil had to reach out a hand to steady the cake as Techno readjusted his position on the bed. When Phil looked back at him, he was kneeling next to Phil with his Nintendo still in hand. He’d contorted and stretched his body awkwardly, so he had his fingers on the control, had the screen in front of Phil, and wasn’t kneeling in the cake.

“This,” he said. “It’s sort of like this.”

“Playing... games?”

Techno shook his head, then nodded his head. “It’s...” he said. His fingers moved on the controls. The game had been paused, but when he pushed start, a boss fight started up. Techno mashed a few buttons without thought and soon enough the ‘Game Over’ screen appeared. He immediately loaded a save that took him back to right before the fight began and started the fight again. He barely glanced at the screen, looking mostly at Phil instead. Again, he let himself die to the monster, though it took a bit longer this time, and reloaded the save. This time, he actually looked at the screen and with practiced movements, killed the boss. He paused the game on the monster starting to disintegrate into pixels on screen after its defeat.

“Like that,” Techno said. “I’m like that.”

Phil looked at the screen, and then back at him.

“When I die,” Techno said, “I don’t disappear like that one.” He pointed to the frozen boss that was half faded away. “I’m like that one.” He pointed at the main character who was doing a victory pose. “I go back when I die and then I do the fights over again and again and again until I win.”

“You what?”

“That’s how I did all of the things in the videos in the exhibit,” Techno said, “but the videos, they only show the last version of the fight. People only saw the last version of the fight, but that isn’t all that happened.”

“You’re saying you reverse time when you die?” Phil asked, stunned. “In all of those fights, you die, but then you go back and are able to try again.” And it fit, didn’t it? How he seemed to anticipate every move of every opponent he had during the massacre. How when it came to Phil, he’d been easily taken down. How he didn’t seem to know how to fight really. How confused he’d been.

“That’s... that’s a god power.”

“Like Zeus?”

“I... sort of,” Phil said. “A god power is a power that affects life and death. It’s anything where the user can bring life to or reverse the death of sapient beings. In this case, you reverse your own death. They’re very rare and very strong.” Strong enough to rip through a city, to cut down top ranking superheroes in an instant because it wasn’t an instant.

“I was thrown into a fighting ring when I was 6,” Techno said, and Phil blinked at him. “I was supposed to die. They used kids for the opening acts, but then I didn’t die. Or, at least, they didn’t know that I did. They eventually made me a main event, because I was so good at killing. I broke out when they tried to have me kill a kid myself. They didn’t kill me, so I didn’t attack them. The people who ran the fighting ring were mad and I ended up running. They kept killing me, so I was eventually able to escape. The first person I killed up here, the first video at the museum, she’d had a gun. She was going to take it out and shoot people. She did shoot people including me. She killed me, so I killed her, but then other people came, and they must have known or seen the video because they killed me, so I killed them. Then the police knew I’d killed all of those people, and they came and killed me, so I killed them. Then, the superheroes were called since I’d killed the police officers and they killed me, so I killed them. And it just kept going and going and I didn’t understand why until I saw those videos. You aren’t like me. None of them were. It would have gone on forever but...”

Phil remembered deciding not to kill him. He’d been expected to after everything he’d done. He was supposed to do it, really, but he hadn’t.

“You asked me when we first came here if I would try to kill you,” Techno said. “I was surprised. I didn’t understand why you would think I’d kill you, but I think I get it now. You wanted to know why I didn’t kill you, Phil. It was because you didn’t kill me.”

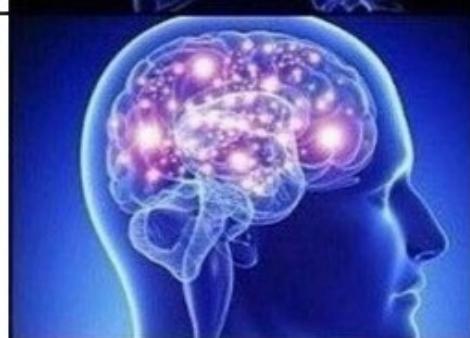
Chapter End Notes

Techno:

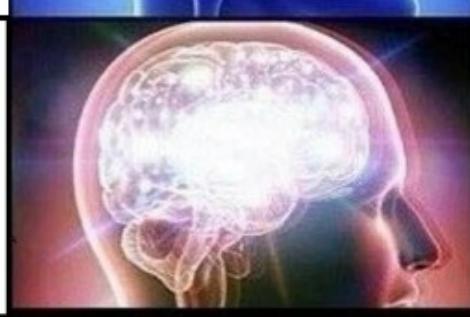
**KILLING A BUNCH
OF PEOPLE BECAUSE THEY
KILLED YOU UNTIL
SOME GUY DOESN'T KILL YOU.**



**BONDING WITH THE
GUY WHO DIDN'T KILL
YOU AND LEARNING MORE
ABOUT THE WORLD THROUGH
HIM AND THE VIDEO
GAMES AND MOVIES HE BUYS YOU.**



**SEEING YOURSELF
KILL PEOPLE IN VIDEOS
AND REALIZING EVERYONE'S
PERSPECTIVES ARE
VERY DIFFERENT THAN YOURS.**



**USING THE VIDEO
GAMES PHIL GAVE
YOU AS A VISUAL AID
TO EXPLAIN WHY YOU
KILLED A BUNCH OF PEOPLE**

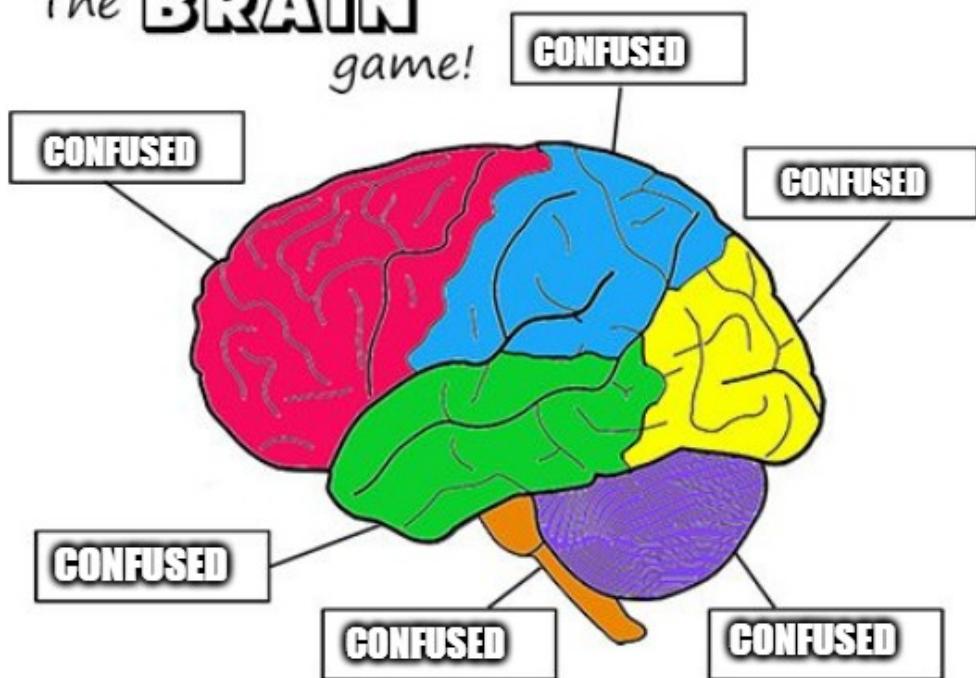


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Phil:

The **BRAIN** game!



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Forever Be Eight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil was different after Techno's birthday, though to be fair, Techno also thought he himself was different after his revelation. There was understanding now in a place in the back of his mind where there had always just been itching confusion. It shook things up a bit, the knowing and the being able to articulate the knowing to Phil. Phil treated him differently, but not in a bad way. He was still Phil. He still braided his hair in the mornings and talked to him about stars at night, but Techno slowly began to understand that there was more of Phil than what he'd been presented when the man thought he had gone on a rampage for no reason.

It had already been growing colder for his birthday, but true winter came quickly after that, leaving them snowed in together a lot of the time. They talked a lot. Last winter they had spent a lot of their time talking as well, but this was different. The last winter had been full of Techno asking things about the world to try to understand it and Phil doing his best to play teacher.

They talked about other things now. They still talked about how the world worked and history some, but a lot of the conversations in those couple of months were about their own personal histories. It became more and more clear that they came from different worlds.

Phil wanted to know more about where Techno had come from, about the Pit and the fighting ring and the deactivated redstone tracker on his arm. Techno wasn't always very comfortable talking about it. His time as a champion in the fighting ring felt oddly disconnected from his life now. Techno knew what had happened, but honestly sometimes things he did in his video games somehow felt more real to him than those things that he had actually done. There was a fuzziness to it and to his time right after he'd met Phil. Phil said it was understandable that those times felt distant considering what had happened to him.

Phil in turn, talked about himself more than he had before. Upon learning just how much their worlds differed, Techno had many questions. He wanted to know how Phil had become a hero and why. He'd apparently joined almost immediately after he'd turned 18, the youngest someone could sign up to be a hero. Then he'd trained for almost 2 years, which was apparently longer than most, but he'd shown a lot of potential and so he was given special training with a mentor. He'd ended up starting out as a level 4 out of 10 hero, whereas most people directly out of training would be at a level 2 or 3. He'd quickly climbed the ranks, becoming a level 5 hero less than two years later meaning he could go out on independent missions by himself by 22. He'd been a max ranked hero by the time he'd met Techno.

Phil had asked him about his parents. (Techno didn't really remember them all that well or where they had gone, but there were blurry positive feelings associated with them.) So, then, Techno had asked him about his parents as well. Phil had never known his father and his mother had died when he was Techno's age. He'd gotten his powers from his mother's side of the family. All of those powers were somehow related to bird features, in particular crows, though Phil having wings and flying was one of the more obvious examples. Some people with his family's type of powers had good eyesight, photographic memories, or the ability to mock different sounds.

And there were other things: favorite foods, trips he'd been on to different places, how he'd done in school, and many other smaller things.

It was nice to know Phil as a person. Techno didn't think he'd ever known anyone as a person before. He didn't think anyone had ever known him as a person either. Even Phil from a few months ago hadn't known him completely, but that was different now. Phil understood things he hadn't then. He seemed to trust Techno more now. He seemed to respect Techno more now. It was nice and they felt closer for it.

It was the beginning of December now and freezing. He and Phil had seemed to come to a mutual agreement that going out to shower today was a horrible decision or even really getting out of bed at a decent time. Eventually, Techno got hungry enough to roll out of bed and make himself some toast.

"Want some?" he asked Phil.

"Sure," Phil replied.

Techno didn't bother asking what he wanted on his toast. He simply spread smooth peanut butter (disgusting, crunchy was the only correct choice) on one slice and butter and grape jelly on the other. He crossed the train car to hand him the plate and then turned to make toast for himself.

"Techno," Phil said as Techno finished spreading butter on his own toast.

"Mmm?" he asked, taking a bite of one of the pieces as he crossed back over to Phil and took a seat at the end of his bed near his feet.

"You're getting crumbs on my bed," he sighed.

Techno rolled his eyes and swallowed. "I'm supposed to believe you're going to eat that and not get crumbs on your bed?" he asked, nodding at the two slices of toast on Phil's plate. He'd pressed the two sides together but had yet to take a bite.

"Fair enough," Phil replied with a half-smile. His fingers tapped a couple of times on the side of the plate and then he took a breath. "Can I take you somewhere in a couple of days?"

"In this cold?" Techno asked.

"We don't have to, but..." Phil looked away.

Techno shrugged. "I don't care way too much if you want to go," he said. "It's fine."

"Okay," Phil said with a breath. "Wednesday?"

"Well, I'll have to check my schedule," Techno said dryly.

Phil spat out a laugh at that. "You're getting too cheeky," he said, tossing one of his smaller pillows at Techno's face. He missed and hit Techno's arm instead, making him drop the plate of toast. He didn't just get crumbs on Phil's bed that morning.

Techno didn't think anything of the request to go somewhere after that. Phil was sure to remind him about it the night before, but Techno didn't put much more thought into it.

They weren't able to take the car, because apparently their destination was not accessible by car. Techno had no complaints about that. He'd ridden in the car once in the snow and didn't particularly

want to experience *that* again. Instead, Phil was going to fly them since it wasn't near anywhere populated anyway.

The flight wasn't particularly long, but it was freezing. Techno wished that they'd picked a less horrible day of the year to go wherever they were going, but it was too late to back out by the time he'd had the thought.

They landed on a large hill. Techno could see the city in the distance. It was a slightly different angle than the one he was used to from the trainyard, but most of the skyline he could see was familiar as they weren't too horribly far from where they called home.

Phil set him down and wandered off to the edge of the peak. "It's a nice view, isn't it?" he asked.

"Uh," Techno said, confused. "Yeah?"

"There used to be a campsite at the bottom of this hill a long time ago when my mother was just a kid, but no one comes out here anymore. The trails from those days aren't really trails anymore, but she remembered the little lake down there, and she used to take me here to camp and hike. She liked the outdoors. When I had a son, I also brought him here."

It took a second for Techno to realize what he'd just said and by the time he did, Phil was kneeling on the ground in the snow. He reached for what had just looked like a weirdly shaped snow pile to Techno. He brushed a glove along its top and side to reveal a smooth grey stone.

There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of the whistling wind.

Then, there was the sound of crunching snow, as Phil leaned away from where he'd been touching the gravestone. "He would have been 18-years-old today." His eyes flickered back to Techno and then returned to the gravestone. "That's an adult," he said. "He should have been an adult today."

Techno's first step was loud in the crushing silence, so much so that he hesitated to take a second, but he did take a second. He walked to stand next to Phil in front of the gravestone.

"He died when he was 8," Phil continued after Techno came to a stop. "He's been dead longer than he was ever alive." There was another pause. "He was my entire world for those 8 years. I never could understand how I kept living after he was gone. I didn't know why I kept living after he was gone."

The grave looked small and alone against the snow-covered landscape. Techno only knew it was a grave because a scene in one of his games had taken place in a graveyard. Yet, this one was not in a graveyard. It was by itself. Graves where people normally went when they died. When they were gone forever.

How little was 8? Techno didn't really... know. Ages were weird for him. The time when he'd been physically 8 was a blurred mess and who knew when he'd been mentally 8. He was 16 now. Eight would be half of a Techno. Less than half a Techno if you added up all of the repeats. That would be *little*, wouldn't it?

The longer he looked at the gravestone, the more discomforted he felt. He knew he did not understand this. He knew he needed to say something. "I am sorry, Phil," he finally settled on. "I don't know what to say. I have never had someone to grieve that I can remember. I don't know what to do here."

"It's okay," Phil said, softly. "I understand. You've already done more for me than everyone else did."

Techno bit his lip. He looked at the grave again and then at the city skyline. “I think if you were to die the way that normal people die,” he said after a moment, “it would tear me apart in a way worse than how anyone who has ever killed me has. If that is how you feel now, I wish you did not.”

“Thanks, Tech,” Phil said, with a small smile ghosting across his face. The smile faded after a moment and Phil made a horrible, choked sound that made Techno flinch. At any other time, he’d be worried Phil was hurt, but with the tears freezing to Phil’s cheeks, Tech did not think the pain he was feeling was physical or anything Techno could fix. “His name was Wilbur,” Phil said. “His name was Wilbur. He was my son and I loved him so much and now he’s gone and I’m not. I still don’t think there was a bigger reason for that, but I’m going to choose one. So, I...” he trailed off, seeming unable to continue for a long time as he just... cried. “I have to move on,” he finally said. He’d taken off his glove and placed his hand on the stone over what Techno could only imagine was Wilbur’s name. As though hoping to feel the warmth of a child instead of the chill of cold stone. “I’m so sorry. I have to move on. I’m going to move on.”

He fisted his hand and sat back. The world was silent once again. Techno couldn’t even hear the wind anymore.

Then, Phil turned to face him. His face was a mess from crying, but he looked calm and determined in that moment. “You don’t know how to fight, do you Technoblade? You’ve never won a fight without dying.”

“...No,” Technoblade, unsure how the topic had changed so quickly.

“I’m going to teach you to fight,” Phil said, tone resolute. “So, the next time someone raises a weapon to you, you may not have to die.”

(When they went to leave a long while later, Techno immediately became worried Phil pulling off his glove in the subzero temperature had damaged him. But Phil could still feel his fingers and the blue staining his entire palm didn’t fade even after they’d warmed up in the train car.)

Chapter End Notes

No meme. Only the 5th stage of grief.

Someone said 'No <3' to the no meme part lol. Thank you for the [meme](#) normemegian on discord (not sure if you have the same user name here.)

Showing Off

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Techno took to training quickly. Phil had mentored or trained many young heroes in his time. It was almost all he'd done for his last few years as a hero. Many of them came with different hang ups. Some were bad at listening to instructions, some got frustrated easily, and an unfortunately large number of them were brimming with arrogance.

Techno didn't have any of these problems. He knew Phil and trusted that he knew what he was doing, so always listened closely. He was adept at learning from failures, and not having to die to figure out what he was doing wrong was considered a benefit. There was... admittedly a bit of arrogance when he figured out he was good at something, but it usually came out in jokes and was well earned besides.

That wasn't to say Phil ran into no issues training Techno.

First, Techno simply was not used to that level physical activity. Most of the people Phil had taught before had already prepared on their own and passed an agility test to be hired by The Guild in the first place. They could run long distances, lift their own body weight, and were able to score at least 20 inches on the sit-and-reach.

Techno was not physically unfit. He'd worked on the farm for the summer, so his strength was pretty good. His flexibility needed a bit of work, however, and his endurance needed even more. The flexibility was easy enough, but the endurance was a struggle.

It was not because Techno wasn't willing to put in the work. On the contrary, he was too willing to put in the work. He'd literally passed out on Phil at one point in the middle of a run. Phil had dramatically reduced how much they exercised after that, working on slowly building up to longer and faster runs, and he'd made sure to pay attention to him more going forward.

Techno, unfortunately, didn't know how to assess his own limits and was unwilling to communicate them besides. He was very good at pretending to be fine when he was not. Thus, it was up to Phil to pay close attention.

They spent most of the winter getting him into good enough shape to start learning to fight. Phil had even ended up getting them a gym membership at a smaller, fairly sketchy gym so there was a good place to run when it was too cold.

Beyond just physical hang ups, Techno had some mental ones as well. He had bad habits. He'd never been taught how to fight. He'd cobbled together a fighting style of his own over the years and it wasn't particularly a good one. However, it was very difficult for him to correct it. A good amount of the spring was spent with Phil patiently putting him back in a proper fighting stance again and again. First for hand-to-hand sparring and then with a sword.

He didn't keep falling into these habits on purpose, obviously. He never tried to argue with Phil or act like he knew best, but there was a mental block in the way of changing how he fought. It had saved his life many times before. Abandoning it for a new fighting style was easier said than done even when, consciously, he wanted to make the change.

Yet, Techno was a good student at the end of the day. He tried his best and he listened to Phil. His body adjusted to the increase in activity very quickly and despite his bad habits, he really was a natural with a sword. By the time the summer began, he was as good as most year two hero recruits despite having only worked for about 6 months and starting at a lower agility level.

He was still a bitch to get up in the mornings.

“Up,” Phil said, tossing a pillow at him.

“No.”

“Techno. Up.”

Techno huffed and put the pillow Phil had thrown at him over his head.

“It’s getting too hot later in the day. You need to run in the mornings.”

Techno grumbled something Phil couldn’t make out but imagined was not very kind. Phil rolled his eyes fondly.

“You are such a teenager,” he said with a headshake. “You agreed to this last night. You said not to allow you to back out.”

“Night me is ignorant. I prefer the heat.”

“I have a surprise for you today in training if you get up now.”

“Is it edible?” Techno asked, peeking out from under the pillow.

“...Possibly?”

Techno put his head back under the pillow. “That means no.”

Phil rolled his eyes again and turned to start making toast. Techno did better with eating a small snack right before training and then eating a bigger breakfast afterwards. So, Phil made two slices of toast and put peanut butter on each. He then cut a banana in half and put half of the banana and a slice of toast on a plate. He set it down on Techno’s bed next to his face.

Techno groaned, but he did sit up and started eating his toast while Phil ate his own pre-breakfast snack.

Techno glared at him as he ate. “I hate this as much as you do,” Phil told him. Not one to force someone to exercise while he sat around, he always joined Techno on his runs. At first this had been rather easy, but Techno was younger at the end of the day, and though it was still relatively cool in the mornings, it was starting to get warm. With a two-mile run on the horizon, how early it was in the morning, and the fact that it was just a bit too warm with the approaching summer, it was not something Phil himself looked forward to.

Phil finished his food first and rinsed off his hands before moving to sit on Techno’s bed. Despite the amount of spite Techno had towards the man who had woken him this morning, Techno still turned and allowed Phil to access his hair while he finished his toast. Phil knew he’d be re-doing it later after Techno showered, so for now he just did a simple, but tight braid to keep it out of his face. He managed to finish the braid only about a minute after Techno finished eating.

“Alright,” Phil said when he was done. “Grab some water for us.”

Techno grunted and got to his feet. He grabbed the clean water bottles that were left to dry the day before on the counter and began filling them up as Phil dealt with his own hair. Phil had already changed into his workout clothes, so he grabbed the water from Techno before telling him he’d meet him outside. He seemed awake enough now that Phil was pretty sure he wouldn’t try to go back to sleep as soon as Phil left him alone.

There was a harness waiting for him near the doorway which was specifically designed with Phil’s wings in mind. He folded his wings against his back and slipped on the harness over them, so they were bound securely against his back. Techno came out just as he finished, and Phil slapped the repurposed power suppressant cuff around his wrist. He took a moment to adjust to not having his superstrength to support his wings. Then, he nodded at Techno, and they started down the familiar route.

It was a pleasant run once they actually got started. He was lucky Techno had never run for exercise a day in his life before starting to train with Phil, because Phil hadn’t been this physically fit in years. He’d never been able to let himself go completely as a rank 10 hero, but he hadn’t put nearly as much effort into... anything until Techno for a long time.

He wouldn’t say he was huffing and puffing by the end of the two-mile run, but he was breathing a bit heavily. Techno, with his 16-year-old lungs and longer legs, had already recovered completely by halfway through their walking period. He was also incredibly smug about that fact. Phil shot him a glare as they came to a stop outside the space they’d cleared out for a training area a bit away from the train car they slept in.

“You’re slow,” Techno noted.

“I am not, you shit,” Phil returned. “I’m basically carrying a backpack full of rocks. I was putting in more effort the whole time.”

“Slow.”

“You’re fucking lucky we’re not sparring today,” Phil said, pointing a finger at him severely. “I’d take off the cuff and toss you around a bit just for that.”

“We’re not sparring today?” Techno asked, confused.

“Nope,” Phil replied. “I’m teaching you something else today.” He went ahead and snapped off the suppression cuff.

Techno eyed him warily as he did so.

“What?” Phil asked with a sharp smile as he unclipped the latch on his harness, allowing his wings to unfurl as he stretched them out. “No snarky remarks from Technoblade when I have access to my powers?”

“What are we doing instead of sparring?” Techno asked instead of answering.

“Well,” Phil said, moving over to the box of equipment they had. “You’re getting pretty good with a sword.” He cut a smile at him. “You’d maybe beat me if I were half as good.”

Techno huffed, but he couldn’t argue.

“So,” Phil continued, still smiling, “I thought it was time to add another weapon to your repertoire.” He pulled out the bow and arrows he’d stored there a few days before. “You’re a close-range fighter,” Phil explained, “but it’s good to be well-rounded. Anyone I’ve ever trained gets trained with at least one close-ranged and one long-ranged weapon. Plus, training with powers, but you’re a special case. We can try different weapons if you want, but this is the one I’m most proficient with, so I thought we’d start here.”

Techno peered at the bow curiously. “I’ve never used something like that before,” he said.

“I’d imagined you wouldn’t have,” Phil said. “Today, I’ll just demonstrate how bows are used and then talk about proper safety and how you actually shoot things. If you want, you could probably try shooting a bit at the end. Then you can decide if you think it’s something you want to continue, or we can look at other ranged weapons.”

“Sounds good,” Techno said.

“Alright,” Phil said. “I have some targets here, why don’t you help me put them up? Make sure to put them all on that side of the field so we’re not shooting towards the living area.”

Techno nodded, and they went about setting up different targets around the area.

When they ran out of targets, they returned back to where all of the equipment was. “So,” Phil said. “I don’t know if you’ve seen many bows being shot up close, but the general idea is you’re going to use the wooden part to line up your shot and the string to propel the arrows forward towards your target. We can get more into how that all works later, but for now,” Phil notched an arrow and pulled back the string, “pick a target.”

“Uh, how about that one?” Techno said, pointing to one that wasn’t the closest or the furthest. It was hanging from a tree.

Phil aimed at it immediately. “The idea is to hit the target,” he said. “Preferably in that center circle. See?” Without waiting for an answer, Phil let the arrow loose. The target was propelled backwards, but when it swung forward again, the arrow was right in the center. “Choose another one,” Phil requested, notching the second arrow and glancing at Techno.

He pointed at one further back and Phil shot at it immediately. In the same movement, he notched another arrow. He looked up at Techno again who silently pointed at the furthest target. Phil shot 20 arrows total. All landed exactly where he’d wanted them to go. Then, he lowered the bow.

“I don’t know much about bows,” Techno said, “but that did seem impressive.”

“Thanks,” Phil said. “Could you help me collect all of the arrows?”

They grabbed the arrows Phil had shot, and Phil made sure to check them all for damage just in case before returning them to the quiver. It had honestly been a while since he’d shot a bow; he couldn’t help but feel a little pride at the fact that he’d managed to hit the bullseye every time despite his lack of practice. Archery had always been something he’d enjoyed since before he was even a hero.

He could feel the rush of accomplishment flowing through him as he slipped the last arrow into the quiver. He glanced up at Techno, eyes sparkling. “Now,” he said. “Want to see me show off?”

“That wasn’t showing off?” Techno asked skeptically.

Phil shook his head. “That was demonstrating,” he said, “and being good.”

“Go ahead,” Techno said, clearly interested.

Phil smiled, put the quiver on his shoulder, and spread his wings. He took flight, taking a couple of loops through the air before notching his first arrow. He let it loose on one of the further targets and was already flipping around in the air while notching a second one before it hit the target. He shot two targets near each other in quick succession before folding his wings and diving. He pulled up with another arrow notched and let it fly before even stabilizing his flight and then did a sharp turn towards another target.

He shot a dozen arrows before landing. Not all of them hit the bullseye head on and he even missed one, but he couldn’t help but still feel like he was flying even after his feet were firmly on the ground.

He glanced over at Techno who seemed speechless for a moment after the display. “You weren’t kidding about showing off,” he finally said.

Phil just laughed. “I wasn’t,” he agreed with a smile. “What do you think? Want to try to learn?”

“From you?” Techno asked. “Definitely.”

Chapter End Notes

Techno and Phil, every day, until Techno hits his 20s:

**people talking to
me in the morning**

@oimaghost

**me processing the
trauma of waking up**

ifunny.co

The Ninth Hat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

With a satisfied sigh, Technoblade sheathed the sword he'd been practicing with and walked to the edge of the training area. Phil had left after their morning run today, trusting Techno to go through his sword exercises without supervision. It was a relatively easy set of moves at this point but doing them was still enjoyable and a good workout for one of their less intense days.

Phil had left a pre-packaged snack and a bottle of water at the edge of the training area before leaving, and Techno picked these things up. He munched idly on the trail mix while walking back towards the train car they kept equipment in. He swapped out the sword for the Nintendo he'd left there earlier and then walked out to a spot near the forest that he often sat at.

He didn't know how long Phil would take but judging by the glint that was in his eyes before he left, Techno wouldn't be surprised if he took a while. The man thought he was good at being sneaky, but Techno had gotten to know him well enough at this point to hazard a guess about what he was doing.

Techno was pretty sure he was about to get a Phil Present.

A Phil Present was a special type of present. Of course, barring a few presents from Kurtis and Deedee, all of the presents he'd ever gotten came from Phil. Not all of those were Phil Presents though.

Technoblade classified the little keepsakes Phil brought home because he saw them and thought of Techno as regular presents. He classified things like new shampoos and everyday clothes as regular presents. He even classified getting a few extra cans of peaches because Deedee knew they were his favorites as regular presents.

Phil Presents, on the other hand, were a lot more dramatic. They were things the man carefully planned out getting, were usually useless or something whose use was extraneous, and were always given with an excited flourish. Birthday presents were an example of Phil Presents.

Techno thought he was safe from Phil Presents for a while considering his birthday had been only a few weeks ago.

Technoblade was apparently "officially an adult" now. Phil had made an even bigger deal out of his birthday than he usually did because it was a "special" birthday. According to Phil, Techno had now hit the physical age where society deemed people were mature enough to live on their own and make their own decisions.

Techno had pointed out that he probably wasn't actually 18 years old considering they'd guessed his birthday based on Techno's fractured memory and Techno had relived many moments by reversing time. Phil had still insisted Techno was now legally an adult.

Techno had responded that he wasn't "legally" anything considering that the events leading to him living past 14 were extremely illegal.

It was a joke Techno had found funny, but it hadn't seemed to amuse Phil.

Techno didn't really understand why Phil made an even bigger deal than usual out of this birthday. The only noticeable difference in what he was allowed to do was watch an "R-rated" movie for the event.

Phil had chosen one about Greek mythology called *300*, but he apparently had not read any of the content warnings.

They'd stopped the movie in the middle.

Now anytime Phil tried to convince Techno to do something he didn't want to do for "his own good", Techno always asked if it was *good* good or *300* good.

Phil wasn't a fan of that.

It had gotten Techno out of a few things in the last couple of weeks because Phil would be too busy blushing to peer pressure him into doing anything, though unfortunately its effects were slowly fading.

It hadn't worked this morning when Phil had forced him to wear one of the dreaded baseball caps on their morning run.

Techno had gotten a bad sunburn on the top of his head during the summer because of his light hair, and Phil had taken it upon himself to buy Technoblade various hats and force Techno to wear them.

Phil told him he looked good in a baseball cap.

Considering how he always said this while looking like he might start giggling, Technoblade was well aware the bastard was a bold-faced liar.

Techno now had a collection of different hats in different styles and colors. The only one that didn't overwhelm him with revulsion on sight was a large floppy sunhat with a pink bow around its base. Unfortunately, while it was great for protecting his head while relaxing in the sun... it didn't work very well when he was running, which was when he'd gotten the sunburn in the first place.

Other than the sunhat, he'd gotten two newsboys hats, one in navy and one in brown, a light grey bowler hat, a white cowboy hat, and three of the aforementioned baseball caps.

God, please let the Phil Present not be another baseball cap. The last one had been bright orange and had a fish on it.

He hoped the Phil Present was something better like a new video game instead. Sure, he'd just gotten a bunch of new games for his birthday, but he'd already played through half of them...

In fact, he was getting towards the end of the one he was currently playing when he heard the telltale sound of flapping wings.

He glanced up to see Phil doing a quick circle around the trainyard. He obviously spotted Techno, because he tilted his wings to fly in Techno's direction. Techno stored his Nintendo in his pocket and got to his feet.

"You went to town just to get food?" Techno asked as soon as the man landed, instantly recognizing the style of the brown paper take-out bag, though he could not make out a logo from where he stood.

Phil's feathers ruffled briefly before he folded his wings neatly against his back. "A 'Hello Phil' every so often would be nice," he said, though his lips curled up into a smile.

"Hello Phil," Techno replied dutifully. "What food did you get me?"

"It's a surprise!" Phil said.

Techno squinted at him. "Food is not a surprise," he said. Then he considered it. "Unless it's cake, but we just had cake for my birthday."

"This food is a surprise."

"Is it cake?" Techno asked.

"No, it's not cake." Phil said with an eyeroll.

"You are a strange man, Phil."

"*Me?*" Phil said. "You are not allowed to make those judgment calls. I had to explain the concept of credit cards to you for three hours last week and I hope you never find an opportunity to get one."

"Honestly it just sounds like free money to me," Techno said with a shrug, "and at least I understand that movie content warnings exist."

"One more word out of you, and I'm eating your food."

And well, that was a threat Techno would listen to (even though it was so clearly an empty one).

"Fine," Techno agreed and let Phil usher him back to the main train car.

"So, what's the surprise?" Techno asked, sitting on his bed. He watched as Phil put the takeout bag as well as another more decorated bag Techno hadn't noticed before on the table.

Phil turned to face him with a grin. "Well," he said. "You're 18 now."

"So, I've heard," Techno replied dryly.

"*And,*" Phil continued, pointedly ignoring him, "while usually training at the Superhero Guild wouldn't even start until someone is 18, you were a special circumstance. Most of the time training goes a year or two before it's considered complete. I thought considering you're legally an adult, have been training for almost 2 years, and you've more than mastered everything a normal Guild recruit would be expected to in training, that you should graduate."

"Graduate?" Techno asked, "So, we're done training?" He wasn't too enthused about that concept. He *liked* training.

"No," Phil said. "We can still train just like we have been. I can still help you learn things you're struggling with and give advice. Nothing has to actually change about how we do things. Just, symbolically, it would be less of me training you and more of us training together."

"Aren't we already training together most days?"

"Yes," Phil said, "that's why it's symbolic."

Techno did not understand. "Okay Phil," Techno said agreeably. He would let Phil do his Phil thing. "Then, what's in the bag."

"You see," Phil said, a spark of eagerness in his eyes that almost sparked a bit of excitement in Techno as well. He reached for the decorated bag. "When a Guild recruit graduates, it's tradition that their mentor gives them a gift that they then incorporate into their costume when they debut as a full hero." He offered the bag out to Techno. "Now, you aren't a superhero, but you are still my trainee, so I thought this might be appropriate for the occasion."

Techno took the bag and peaked inside. There was a thin layer of white paper over the gift. He reached into the bag to brush the paper aside and pull out the contents.

The first thing he noticed was that it was shiny. It was a gleaming, golden, head-sized circle with various gems of different colors embedded into its base. A crown, Technoblade identified.

"I thought it would fit you," Phil said with just a touch of a smug smile.

"It's better than the baseball caps," Techno said, glancing at him briefly before looking back at the crown.

"Here," Phil said. "Let me put it on you."

Techno easily allowed Phil to take the gift and then turned his back to the man. Phil sat next to him on the bed and took a couple of minutes to redo the braid that had loosened during training before carefully placing the crown atop Techno's head.

A mirror was being shoved into Techno's hand a moment later, so he could look. It did fit him, Techno thought. It sat on his head well enough that he half wondered if Phil had measured his head in his sleep and something about his normal braid seemed to match the headpiece well.

"It's very nice, Phil," Techno said, reaching up a hand to touch the edge of the crown. "Thanks."

"I'm glad you like it," Phil said with a soft smile before getting off the bed to grab the other bag. "The second tradition is that the mentor buys his trainee dinner."

"Because you do not buy me dinner all of the time?" Techno asked.

"It's special," Phil insisted. "It's symbolic! I even got you pasta carbonara!"

And well, Techno wasn't going to protest *that*.

Chapter End Notes



[from Imgflip Meme Generator](https://imgflip.com)

(Phil isn't lying. Techno does look good in all types of hats, but it's more on the adorable side of good than Techno would appreciate. Just wait and see how many hats Wilbur will one day shove on his head to see how cute he looks in them.)

VAND Alert

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil had never appreciated spring enough before he'd started living in a train car. Sure, he'd always welcomed the spring after a harsh winter. He'd liked that he could start leaving his thick winter coat at home and how fresh the world smelled after an early spring shower. The seemingly dead foliage suddenly coming back to life had always been a welcome sight, but now that he was functionally camping all the time, he appreciated these little changes to the weather even more

Sure, Phil had managed to set up a heating system that kept the train cars comfortable even during the coldest parts of winter, but winters were still often rough in the trainyard.

Snow was never shoveled in the trainyard and the roads leading to it were never plowed since, as far as the city knew, no one ever came out here anymore. Driving was neigh impossible for a few months each winter. They were just lucky Phil had wings and superstrength. He could fly to get supplies in basically any weather conditions when needed, but it still left Techno snowed in.

Techno wasn't a big fan of being snowed in and that restlessness had only gotten worse over the years. He was used to training basically every day now, but during the worst parts of winter, it simply wasn't feasible to the man's annoyance. (Telling Techno that shoveling snow was a good enough workout just landed Phil with an unamused glare.)

Techno tended to get antsy without training as an outlet. If Phil turned his back for more than 5 seconds, Techno would escape and go to the training field in frankly ridiculous weather.

Plus, the two of them tended to get on each other's nerves when trapped together in such a confined space. Phil thought that was probably fair. In fact, it was a testament to how well they did get along that they didn't outright murder each other when stuck in a literal box for sometimes days at a time.

Now, however, it was spring, which meant Techno could be outside training with his sword (and not annoying Phil by whining about not being outside training with his sword literally every waking hour of every day) as much as he liked. He was doing so currently, in fact.

Phil had been training with him earlier but had decided to stop after a reasonable amount of time. Now, he was sitting on the ground nearby, splitting his time between watching Techno and looking at the budding leaves on the nearby trees.

Everything was peaceful. It was even warm enough in the sun that Phil thought he might lay down and nap if Techno decided to keep training much longer. Techno would probably tease him for doing so, complaining about Phil making him get up early in the morning only for him to laze around and nap in the afternoon. It'd probably be worth it today.

Techno paused going through his sword exercises to grab a drink of water.

The quiet stillness was the only reason Phil was able to hear the first siren.

He was already on his feet before his mind fully registered what the sound was, years of training taking over his body briefly even though he had not been a hero in many years.

“What?” Techno asked, water bottle half to his mouth.

“The city’s sirens are going off,” Phil said.

Techno turned his head to face the city skyline in the distance. He paused, silent for a long moment. “I think I hear something,” he said, turning back to Phil. “What does that mean?”

“It’s a VAND alert,” Phil explained. “A level 5 in particular.”

“What’s a VAND alert?” Techno asked.

“It’s a villain and natural disaster alert,” Phil explained, still staring at the city. He could make out nothing out of the ordinary even with his slightly better than average vision. “It’s used when there’s a city-wide disaster either through human or natural causes. A level 5 is the worst. It means all civilians should take immediate cover in the center of their homes or a designated safe area and all heroes are made active.”

“That sounds bad,” said Techno.

“You were a level 3,” Phil noted.

“Well then that sounds really bad,” Techno said. “What do you think’s going on?”

“No idea,” Phil said, tearing his eyes away from the city to glance at Techno. “We should get inside the train car just in case. I’ll check the phone. VAND alerts usually come with phone notifications.”

Techno nodded and turned towards the main train car. He notably didn’t put his sword away. It was probably the correct reaction; Phil wondered idly if he should have picked up his own weapons from the weapon train car. However, by the point he had the thought, they’d already made it back to the main living area.

Phil grabbed the emergency cell phone from the shelf next to his bed and powered it on. He winced as the VAND alert went off, loud and shrill.

Techno looked over Phil’s shoulder at the screen, though he likely could make nothing of it since it was just a wall of text scrolling past.

“What does it say?” Techno asked after a moment.

“VAND ALERT.” Phil read aloud. “Multiple reports of zombie infections across the city. Take cover in your homes. Report any signs of infection by calling 998 and quarantine from those showing signs of infection.”

“Zombies?” Techno said with a frown. Techno had almost certainly never seen a zombie. There hadn’t been an outbreak in the country since he’d been born. Heck, Phil had never seen a zombie and the last outbreak he’d heard of had been a small one contained to the airport when he’d been 6.

This alert said there were *multiple* infections across the city.

Phil was about to say something but was interrupted by the shrill VAND alert tone as an update rolled by.

“Watermain break at Timber Square. Zone 12 flooded. Do not go outdoors. Citizens taking shelter in zone 12 retreat to the roofs of your homes if possible and wait for rescue. If unable to do so, call 997.”

They were getting out the specific emergency numbers, numbers reserved for situations like this when too many calls would be coming in and it was important to prioritize and delegate.

All heroes were supposed to be on deck during a level 5 VAND alert. Even ones who were off duty, undercover, or retired were called in. Even those dishonorably discharged were welcome. Phil wondered if that would apply to him even though he was actively a fugitive.

Phil sat on his bed and stared at his phone as alerts continued coming in. With a level 5 alert, all newscasts would currently be down. Phil was the same as all of the other citizens in the city, sitting on his bed and watching the updates roll by.

“Fire on 1st and Gillmore. Unknown cause. Evacuate North. Do not evacuate South. Horde of at least 2 dozen on 1st and Blake. Get to designated safe area. If unable to evacuate call 996.”

Techno got up, checking that the doors were secured. Though really, the train car wouldn’t be much protection against the things going on in the city right now.

“Horde of 50 infected in Zone 3. Do not leave your homes. Report any signs of infection in your home by dialing 998 and quarantine from those showing signs of infection.”

Techno turned back to the kitchen area.

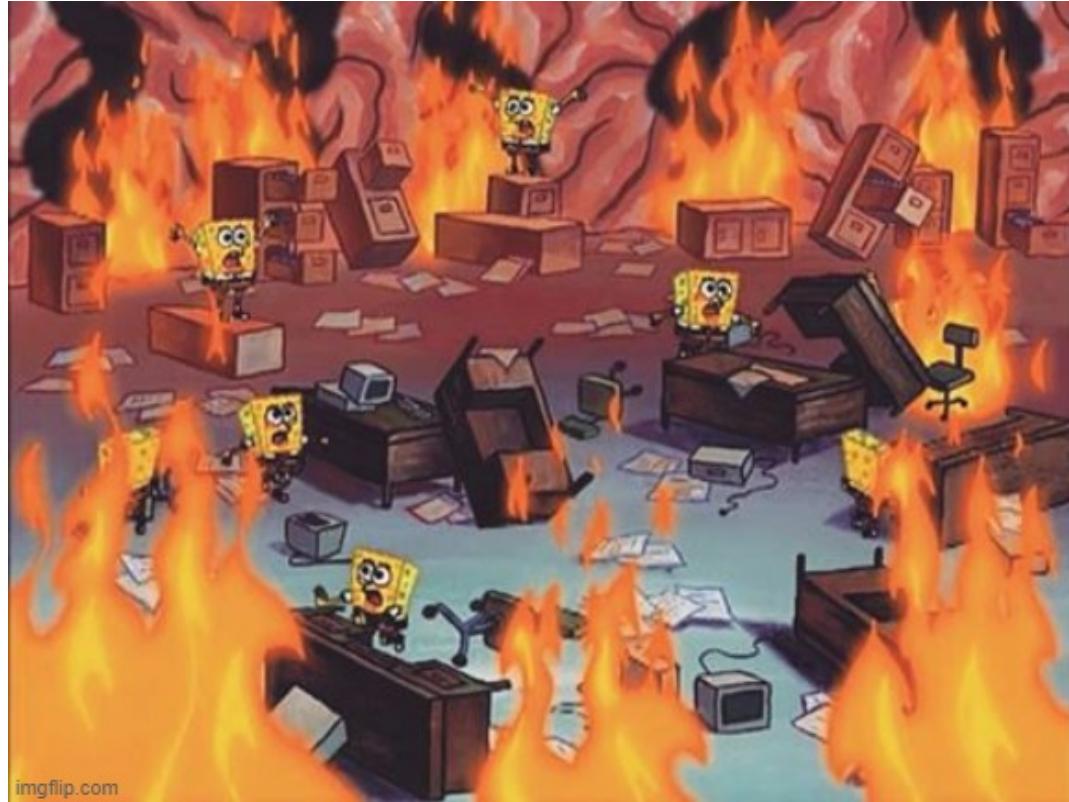
“Avoid Zone 1. Do not leave your homes. Civilians in Guild Headquarters and the mayor’s office, retreat to designated safe zones. Quarantine from all with signs of infection. Report infections to 998.”

A cup of coffee was pressed into Phil’s hand. Phil looked at it with a blink. Techno sat on his own bed across from Phil.

“Head of Guild Sullivan dead at Guild Headquarters. Dragonfly taking over temporary command of Guild forces. Do not leave your homes. Avoid the area.”

Chapter End Notes

The city right now:



[from Imgflip Meme Generator](https://imgflip.com/meme/111111)

A new character has just joined the scene. If you're paying attention, you know who!

The Tenth Week

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Techno dug his finger into the last knot in the string of lights he'd been set to untangle and carefully pulled it apart, leaving him with a long string of Christmas lights. They were old but they'd tested to make sure they worked before bothering to untangle them. They were multi-colored bulbs that blinked at an almost headache inducing speed when on.

"Any more?" he asked.

Kurtis shook his head. "That was the last of the ones that still work," he said. "Go ahead and wrap them up. We'll take it out to the fields tomorrow."

Techno nodded and grabbed one of the pieces of cardboard they'd been wrapping the lights around, starting to carefully wrap this last set of lights around it.

The living room of Kurtis and Deedee's house was currently covered in every type of electric light source Techno could have imagined and some he could not have. They'd been sorting through old lamps, Christmas lights, and flashlights all day, fixing up what they could. Everything not salvageable had been piled up in a corner.

The things that weren't usable weren't going to go to waste. Broken glass was apparently good for zombie traps, at least according to Kurtis. Techno felt inclined to trust Kurtis on this.

Kurtis was the only person among them that had lived during a time period where zombies were an actual threat (until now of course). He knew a lot more about how to set up protection from zombie hordes than Techno or even Phil.

He also knew that even though the zombie plague seemed to be contained in the city for now and even seemed to be getting better in the last couple of weeks, that they couldn't trust that it would remain that way.

Phil and Techno hadn't planned to stay with Kurtis and Deedee after zombies first attacked the city. Even though it was an unpopulated area with less risks of a zombie attack, they hadn't wanted to stay in the not very defendable trainyard, so they'd gotten in the car and drove away from the city.

The only place they'd known to go to that was far from the city was Kurtis's farm, though they'd at first only planned to check-in. Kurtis and Deedee, already preparing for a zombie apocalypse, had instantly invited them to stay.

Techno and Phil had agreed, especially upon seeing what all Kurtis had already set up. They'd been staying with them for 2 and a half months now.

There had been no major zombie incidents in decades, but Kurtis had always still maintained most of the anti-zombie safeguards on his farm whereas most people, especially those with as much land as him had let those safeguards go to the wayside.

There were ditches dug out around the boarders of his property. They had apparently always been there but had been covered up, so no person or animal could accidentally fall into them. He'd dug out

any debris in them every spring. He'd even set up security cameras around said ditches when the technology became available. Once switched on, they allowed them to see from the house miles away if anything had fallen into the ditches.

Noise and light machines had already been set up near traps on his property. Zombies were attracted to intense stimuli, and things like flashing lights and loud sounds could even distract their usually one-track minds off of a hunt. The machines hadn't been running for years, but he'd tested them every fall and thus most were still working. He'd turned them on the second the word "zombie" appeared on the news. They were currently gathering supplies to make even more of these traps.

Deedee had been working on bringing all of the livestock into the closer, more defendable pastures while Kurtis double checked that the fences around his crops were sturdy. They were, of course, as he maintained them well.

They'd taken inventory of their stores, which were more than Techno had expected them to have considering how many cans of peaches they were willing to give up to Techno every fall. Of course, the fact they hadn't been able to sell to the city the last couple of years ironically probably helped them, but even without that, it was clear food stores had always been a priority. Kurtis had shown Phil and Techno the 3 different bunkers he had on his property filled with enough food for multiple people to live there for literal years.

These things would be enough to keep most small groups of zombies away. If a horde large enough came through, bodies would stack up in the ditches and become bridges of flesh for their fellows and they'd eventually overwhelm all traps and fences. However, there would be enough warning with their defenses that they could minimize the loss and there were places to retreat to for however long they needed.

Techno finished wrapping the lights and set them aside in the pile with the other working lights.

He glanced over at Phil who was sitting on the couch with Bea. Bea was currently cautiously allowed in the living room even with all of the lights scattered everywhere provided she had supervision. Considering Phil's fingers seemed only to tangle strings of lights more, he'd been delegated this task. Bea was currently laying with her head in his lap, paying no mind to the wings stretched out beside her.

Phil had decided if Kurtis was willing to share all of his secrets, they shouldn't actively hide theirs. Knowing Kurtis, as soon as Phil had given him even that little nugget of information about their identities, he put together everything. He hadn't seemed to judge.

He'd even taken Techno down into the storm cellar to offer him one of the couple of slightly rusted swords he stored down there. Techno had thanked him, and then had returned the favor by offering him some of the much sturdier swords out of the car trunk.

A now familiar sound came over the television and Techno turned his attention to it. They kept the television on constantly during the day so they could get any news broadcasted from the city.

The city had decreased the alert level to a conditional level 3. Usually, a level 3 meant that no civilians were allowed to leave their homes, but the alert had dragged on so long that certain people were given daily escorts by heroes to keep important industries working. This included reporters whose rolls had changed from reporting the news to keeping track of the many alerts still in effect in the city, trying to keep civilians somewhat calm, and saying whatever the heroes instructed them to say.

Propaganda was the word Kurtis had started using more and more as the days went by. Every newscast it became clearer (to anyone with half a brain) what had actually happened and was still happening in the city.

This newscast was apparently a special one. Instead of reporters simply repeating what they were told like puppets, the puppeteers had decided to speak. There were three people on the screen: the current Head of Guild, his second in command, and mayor Sanja Werner.

The superhero with the alias “Bad” had apparently been the Head of the Guild up until about 4 years before Technoblade had escaped the Pit but he had since retired. He’d been a good leader according to Phil, so at first it had seemed like a good thing when he’d come out of retirement. He should have been experienced. He should have been able to restore order to the city. He should have been good.

Techno didn’t know what he was like before, but he was clearly either stupid or malevolent now. Every step he’d taken since coming back to the job had been a horrible mistake.

Walls had been erected in the city under the guise of stopping zombies from migrating to different areas. It did do that technically, but it also kept people who were still alive from leaving dangerous areas. The walls were guarded and due to the level three alert, civilians were not allowed outside. People trying to flee from the area were not allowed over the walls but were instead told to return to their homes (ignoring the fact that it was very likely their homes had been destroyed or, considering the neighborhoods that were usually the most effected, they didn’t have one to begin with.) They became like fish in a barrel for the zombies with those walls.

Food was also apparently scarce, deliveries of it disproportionately provided to more affluent areas and people could not go out to get their own food. Even if grocery stores were open, even if people were allowed out of their homes, taking a trip down to the market when there could be a zombie around every corner wasn’t a good idea. That combined with the fact that laws prohibiting personal gardens had been in effect for years meant very few people had access to their own food.

Communication was also being controlled. Cell service was restricted under the guise of making sure emergency calls got through. People couldn’t call their families or go online. If people had been separated that first day when the lockdown started, they didn’t even know if their loved ones were alive. The only information they got about what was going on was from the newscasts, most of which featured reporters who looked like someone was pointing a gun at them from behind the camera.

It was almost, Techno thought, like instead of trying to *stop* the zombies, the superheroes were sectioning off the city into two pieces: the undesirables (aka poor) and the useful. The undesirables became zombie food (and ultimately more zombies). The useful, on the other hand, became easily manipulated between being constantly scared out of their minds and being fed increasingly extremist messages from their television screens.

Techno’s eyes drifted to the man standing beside Bad on screen.

And one might wonder who would want more zombies.

Schlatt was a completely new player. Phil had never heard of him nor had Kurtis or Deedee. He’d just appeared in the middle of the chaos and Bad had almost immediately promoted him to his right-hand man, unceremoniously tossing Dragonfly both out of her position as temporary Head of Guild and the position she’d had before.

Schlatt was also a necromancer. A previously unknown necromancer who suddenly appeared in the city at the same time a zombie epidemic of unknown origins started despite the disease having been

eradicated in the region for decades.

The explanation Bad gave was that Schlatt was hired to help control the undead currently wreaking havoc on the city. He'd apparently been "sent by a god" to save them.

That was another thing about this new-old Head of the Guild. He controlled his rhetoric mostly, but every so often he slipped in some religious nuttery. Some real cult-like stuff. The look in his eyes made Techno think he had a lot more thoughts in that direction than he openly expressed. Techno had a feeling he was just waiting to prime the public more before sprouting more extreme religious speech. It made Techno's neck hair stand on end.

"I don't trust him," Techno said scowling at the television as Bad gave his daily report about how the heroes were "handling" everything and the citizens just needed to lay low and wait.

"I have no idea why," Kurtis commented dryly.

"Everyone trusts Bad," Phil said.

And it was true, obviously. There wasn't so much as a whisper of dissent from the city's citizens or other heroes, at least none they'd seen.

"Well then everyone is stupid," Kurtis scoffed.

"I trust Bad," Phil said softly, almost like he was talking to himself. He scratched Bea under the chin. "I *know* Bad. Bad gave me advice when Wilbur was born; he gave me time off when he died.

If Kurtis wondered who Wilbur was, seeing as Phil had never mentioned him before in front of the man, he didn't ask.

"Well then something's changed," Kurtis said with a nod at the television. "Whatever's up on that screen is not trustworthy."

"Yes," Phil agreed reluctantly, "you're right." He gently shoved Bea off of him then and stood, turning away from the television. "I'm going to go check on the perimeters."

Technoblade watched him go, very aware that checking the perimeters was just an excuse to leave the room and get away from the lies coming from a man Phil apparently trusted.

Techno stood as well. "I'll go with him," he said.

Kurtis nodded, knowingly as Techno left the room.

By the time Techno managed to leave the house, Phil was already gone. He had not done as he'd said and gone to check the perimeter, Techno easily discerned as he was not on the path they usually took to check everything.

It took a bit of searching (and a jerk of the head from Deedee who was tending to the horses) for Techno to finally find Phil.

Phil was standing in the hayloft when Techno pulled himself up the ladder. He was looking out a window; it faced the direction of the city far, far out of sight.

If Phil heard him clambering up into the hayloft, he didn't acknowledge it. He didn't even glance at Techno as he sidled up next to him to look out of the window himself.

After a moment, Techno sighed. “You want to help, don’t you?” he asked.

Phil’s response was slow coming. “I wouldn’t know how to at this point.”

Techno shrugged. “I’ve never been a hero like you were, but I’m pretty sure you just *do*. You pick up a sword. You fly around. You chop off the heads of some zombies. Nothing complicated about it.”

“The heroes wouldn’t accept my help,” Phil said, eyes still on the horizon.

“Meh. The heroes are currently being led by a religious nut either in cahoots with or being puppetted by a necromancer who likely started this mess. It’s probably for the best that they’re not big fans of you right now.”

There was a pause. “I have other responsibilities now,” he said.

Techno glanced at him. “Phil, if you’re talking about me, don’t. I’m not your responsibility.”

“Aren’t you?” Phil asked lightly.

“I thought I was legally an adult now,” Techno said with an eyebrow raise.

Phil pursed his lips.

“You finished training me,” Techno said. “We train together now. Isn’t that what you said? We fight together now.”

“Are you suggesting you’d come to the city with me?” Phil asked. He turned from the window then to look at Techno.

“If you fight, I fight too,” Techno said simply.

“I’m not taking you into a war zone, Techno,” Phil said with a frown. “Not after everything you’ve been through.”

“Why not?” Techno asked.

Phil turned away. “You’ve seen enough bloodshed.”

“I’ve caused enough bloodshed,” Techno countered. “Don’t forget that part.”

Phil said nothing.

“And maybe,” Techno said, thinking back to the newscasts they’d seen in the past 10 weeks since the first zombie attack. He recalled the videos of a city in ruin and people dying, “I owe something to that city. To those people. At least I do to the innocent ones who acted only out of fear. Maybe saving a few people from a zombie horde will make up for the things I’ve done.”

Phil seemed surprised by his statement. Probably because Techno had never brought up his past crimes with any hint of guilt. “You don’t need to... It wasn’t your fault, Techno. You were a scared and confused child.”

“And now there are scared and confused children there,” Techno said, “and between the two of us, we could probably do something about it.” He turned to flash a grin at Phil. “Besides, what’s the worst a war can do? Kill me?”

Phil looked at him, and no matter what he'd said on and after Techno's 18th birthday, Techno was sure that was the first time Phil had seen him as an adult.

"Okay," Phil said quietly, "but we'll do this right. Like real heroes even if that means what counts as heroes in that city deem us villains."

Techno nodded.

"You should take a truck of food with you," Deedee called out from below them. She had been eavesdropping, but that didn't really matter at this point. They'd stopped keeping secrets from each other when the world started to end. "And some seeds. Lord knows half that city's starving by now."

"Right," Phil agreed. "Food and protection. We'll start there."

"It's better than what their heroes are doing for them now," Techno agreed, turning to descend the ladder back to the main part of the barn. They had work to do.

Chapter End Notes

MY ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE TEAM

**OLD
FARMER WITH
UNDIAGNOSED
PTSD**

Team Leader

PIG

brawler

**BIRD
MAN WITH
DIAGNOSED
PTSD**

weapons expert

**THE
FARMERS DAUGHTER.
HAS
KILLED SOMEONE
WITH A
SHOVEL BEFORE.
(UNRELATED.)**

brains

**MAN...
MAYBE IF
WE HAD ONE
TECHNO
WOULD DIE LESS.**

medic

**NIKI
(EVENTUALLY)**

speed fighter

**BEA
THE DOG!**

mascot

**...I
GUESS
WILBUR**

Guy who dies first

imgflip.com

[from Imgflip Meme Generator](https://imgflip.com)

When Gods Bleed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Zone 8 wasn't in as bad of shape as most of the city. It was mainly a residential area filled with middle-class families. It had been a nice area, quiet. It had a small, but well-funded high school and a nice little park with a duck pond nearby.

Phil would know. He'd lived in a house two streets away before Wilbur had died.

“Are you good?” Techno asked. Phil wondered how he was able to tell something was off when the thought of Wilbur had only brushed past Phil's mind briefly. Techno was getting better at that, scarily better. Though in truth Phil had found himself being able to read Techno better as well. Being out on the dangerous city streets with only each other as backup had made them hyperaware of every move the other made. The need to be quiet had made them develop other ways of communicating even sometimes when they didn't intend to do so.

Techno must have caught some misstep that Phil hadn't even noticed himself take.

“Wilbur and I lived in this neighborhood once,” Phil explained. He shook his head. “I'm fine. Just needed a second.”

Techno tilted his head in acknowledgment and glanced down the road, seeming to take in the houses and their inhabitants peeking out of them with new eyes.

The fact that people were more spread out than in the apartment dense inner city and the buildings were better quality than the ones in the poorer zones meant that the people here had had a better chance of survival at the beginning.

Some of them were even outside on their porches, though there was a certain caginess to them that made it clear they were ready to bolt back inside at a moment's notice if zombies suddenly showed up. However, for now, a different danger was slowly enticing them all outside.

Zone 8 was in better shape when it came to zombies, but that just meant there were more people still alive in it. People who needed food. People who didn't have any.

The heroes had provided some food to this zone, but it was not nearly enough, most of the reserves going to the downtown areas where the government was still trying to function and to the richer neighborhoods which were in even better shape than this place.

Up until now, Phil and Techno had mostly worked under the cover of the night in the poorest areas of the city, seeing if there was anything to salvage both in terms of supplies and human life in the worst neighborhoods that the heroes hadn't even bothered to glance at. They'd looked for survivors, killed off what zombies they could, and left supplies for anyone who came across them.

However, they had now started to expand their efforts into other areas, ones that had not been as dire at onset, but were starting to slip into desperation as food supplies got scarcer and scarcer and funneled away from places like this more and more.

Kurtis had made and stock-piled his own homemade MREs over the course of the few months Techno and Phil had been working in the city. Every morning for the past week, Techno and Phil had been stuffing hiking backpacks full of nothing but food and water bottles before toting them around to different parts of the city. Phil was also carrying a large tote bin full of them, and it was a good thing too as there seemed to be a good number of people alive on this street.

Phil set down the tote and his backpack in the middle of the street before nodding to Techno and taking a stack of MREs and some water bottles. He left Techno to stand by the other supplies and turned to walk up to one of the houses that looked still inhabited.

He knocked, and a woman answered the door after a few moments, though she did leave the chain on.

Phil smiled at her warmly. "I have food and water for your household," he said.

"Are you a hero?" she asked.

"I..." Phil said, and it felt odd to him to say 'no.' It had felt odd to avoid the heroes these last few months. There was an instinct to fly up to any hero they saw to touch base with them, to work with them, "not exactly. Not anymore."

She nodded, seeming to be satisfied with this, and closed her door to undo the chain. She wouldn't be able to carry all of the supplies in herself, so Phil knelt and set his load down just inside her doorway.

"There's packages of seeds in each of the meal kits," he told her when he stepped back. She blinked and then nodded before closing the door.

Phil turned back around to see that some of the braver residents, upon seeing Phil giving out things, had moved off their porches to approach Technoblade. Techno started handing things out to them as well, and Phil went to grab more supplies to take to other households.

Things progressed as Phil had anticipated after that. A few more people came out to get supplies from the center, but many remained inside. Some homes were clearly empty, and some refused to answer the door. He still left food for those that didn't answer.

The thing that first tipped them off that something was going awry was when the jumpy neighborhood residents seemed to suddenly disappear as Phil bent down to get another stack of MREs.

He and Techno looked up.

"Here comes the tyrant," Techno said under his breath. Phil frowned.

It was really only a matter of time before they attracted the attention of the heroes, he knew, especially now that they were doing more during the day. Still, Phil didn't know if he was prepared for this.

Phil could make out Bad flying towards them from the direction of downtown. He was flanked by some heroes Phil couldn't identify from this distance. The only reason he could recognize Bad was that he looked more like a dark black ink stain against the skyline than a human figure. They were definitely moving in their direction, however, and Phil wasn't fool enough to think it wasn't because of him and Techno.

"I'll talk to him," Phil said.

"Be careful," Techno said, leery.

“I know him,” Phil said, flashing Techno a reassuring smile.

“I don’t know if you do know him,” Techno said, pursing his lips.

“I’ll be fine.” Phil promised and he meant it when he said it, but as he stretched out his wings and took to the skies, he couldn’t help but feel trepidation.

Bad had been a friend, but he also had been the Head of Guild for a reason. He was incredibly powerful, and Phil didn’t think he could beat him if it came down to a fight.

No one quite knew what Bad’s powers were, but there were whispers that whatever they were, they came with the added perk of immortality. Some even hypothesized that he wasn’t actually a man, but some other creature from before humanity existed.

Phil was unconvinced of that last part. Perhaps if he’d never met the man in person, had never talked to him, had never been chastised for using the word ‘fuck’ by him, Phil could have believed it, but no. Phil was pretty sure there was a man under all of that power. He was a powerful man, but a man in the end.

Phil did, however, believe that the man had some sort of god power, but no one knew what it was. All Phil and the general public knew about his powers were that they sometimes physically represented themselves with dark black splotches that floated around the man. His entire body, in fact, looked more like one of those ink stains used in psychological tests to exam people’s personalities. Wisps of the dark inky material would sometimes separate themselves from his form and dissolve into thin air.

“Bad,” Phil said as he approached, careful to keep his palms out in a placating gesture. The two of them stopped about 10 yards away from each other, more over the center of the city than the neighborhood Phil had come from.

“Phil,” Bad replied. Phil could make out more about the other heroes behind him. He recognized both of them as younger heroes Phil himself had helped train. “What are you doing?”

“I’m just trying to help,” Phil told him calmly.

“I’ve heard rumors about a group of vigilantes on the move. I hadn’t anticipated it being you.”

“We’re not vigilantes,” Phil said, though perhaps that was a bit of a fib. “We’re just handing out supplies.”

“Unregulated supplies,” Bad said, crossing his arms.

Phil blinked at him. “Does that matter at this point?” he asked, almost with a laugh in his tone. “These people are starving. Most of the people in the city are starving. I have food and resources. We could work together to help people.”

“You’re not helping anyone by breaking quarantine and going over the zone barriers,” Bad said.

“I haven’t been bitten,” Phil said. “I wouldn’t if I had been. It’s not like it’s an airborne disease.”

“By crossing our barriers, you could have easily given zombies a way to pass through,” Bad said.

Phil squinted at him, feeling just a bit irritated. “Bad,” he said. “I can fly. We’ve been flying over it, not making any holes.”

“It’s still a risk,” Bad said.

“It literally isn’t,” Phil argued back, “and even if it was, it’s less of a risk than not doing anything.”

“You’re causing unrest in the population. We got reports of people leaving their houses to get your supplies which is currently against the law. It could be dangerous to them and us.”

“Well,” Phil snapped, “maybe if you fed them, they’d be less likely to break your rules. They are *starving*, Bad. Years of seed restrictions mean they don’t even have the option to make their own gardens. They’re completely reliant on food being given to them and you’re not giving them any.”

He pointed at Bad. The blackness around him seemed to pulse.

“There was barely enough food in the city for it to function before the apocalypse, so no one had any backup stores. There isn’t even fresh water! The Captain can control the weather. The least you could do is have her make it rain fresh water for everyone to gather, but you’re not! You’re focusing all of your efforts on population control instead of trying to deal with actual issues. The heroes *are* the biggest issue at this point. Everything you’re doing is just making it worse!”

Bad did not respond.

And then Phil felt it.

It was a familiar feeling, one that hit him right in the chest. It’s something he’d felt almost constantly for going on 13 years now, but he’d only felt it with such intensity exactly once before.

Crushing grief.

If he had not already learned to look his grief in the face, it would have dropped him out of the sky in that moment. Wilbur’s name pierced his head like a spear to the back of the neck. If he had not gotten into the habit of saying the name out loud in the last few years, he felt his head may have popped like a balloon with too much pressure built up.

As it was, his head began to ache with a migraine. His wings stuttered briefly before returning to their normal rhythm.

Upon recovering, Phil looked up at Bad who was watching him with a blank expression.

“Did you,” Phil said calmly, “just try to use my son against me?”

There was surprise and, if he looked hard enough, perhaps guilt in Bad’s black glowing eyes, but the hero said nothing in response.

So, Phil punched him in the face.

Bad was lucky they’d been in the air, because most of the inertia from the punch contributed to his unwilling flight backwards and not to the damage to his face. Still, if he had been anyone else, a punch like that from Phil likely would have killed him. If it hadn’t, the sudden halt of his flight by a skyscraper would have.

As it was, when Bad resurfaced from inside the building, Phil could just catch the glint of a few beads of blood on his face.

Phil honestly hadn't been sure he *had* blood seeing as his body usually just looked like an ink stain. Apparently, however, there was flesh under that cover of blackness, and Phil had managed to pierce it.

Phil was already flying towards him before he hit the skyscraper, no hesitation in any move he made. Mental agony ripped through him once more, but Phil did not falter. He was accustomed.

Bad was forced to dodge him. Then he was forced to dodge him again.

It quickly became clear that Bad was going to lose. His powers, whatever they were, helped him hover in the air, they helped him heal his skin and retain his youth, but Phil was pretty sure those things were just consequences like Phil's strength and slightly better vision helped him with flight. His actual power, however, the one that made him stand out from other heroes, was becoming less and less effective on Phil by the moment.

The other two heroes didn't seem to know what to do, but they certainly didn't try to join the fight. Of course, they didn't. When someone was beating the shit out of someone who was considered a god two minutes ago, you didn't join that battle.

And he was beating the shit out of Bad. More and more of Phil's punches were landing as the fight dragged on while fewer and fewer of Bad's mental claws managed to dig in.

Phil literally tossed him onto the courthouse rooftop, and he stayed down.

Phil landed next to him. "I said I didn't want to fight," Phil said, coldly. "I'm still willing to talk if you're finished. We should focus our energy on healing this city, not damaging each other."

Bad looked up at him, and then his eyes slipped to the side. He said something in a language Phil did not know. Phil looked behind himself, but there was nothing there.

"What did you just do?" Phil asked slowly.

And then there was screaming.

Chapter End Notes

Phil: I don't want to fight. I just want to talk.

Bad (mentally): Wilbur.

Phil: Get my son's name out of your whore brain.

Also.

Phil: I'm here to either raise or fight God and you're looking pretty middle aged right now.

After an 11 v 1

Chapter Notes

FYI: A character gets physically ill in this chapter and it's lightly gross.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Alright," said Techno taking a slow breath in, "not left then."

He turned right instead.

He'd lost sight of Phil before the turning left fiasco, and still had no idea where he could be. The last he'd seen Phil had been throwing Bad around in the skies. Techno had worked his way through the city towards them, but it had been slow progress before the apocalypse take two began.

At this point, Techno's only goal was to get out of the city. Phil would be fine; he could fly over this pandemonium. They could meet back up near where the supply truck was parked outside city limits.

Techno came to another intersection and chose right randomly, hoping he made the correct choice first this time.

He almost immediately came face to face with one of the not-quite-zombie things but managed to stab it in the skull before it got its teeth anywhere near him.

"If I ever come face to face with that necromancer, I'm going to slice his head off," he groused as he pulled his sword out of the already crumbling skull. It was covered in some sort of green mossy goo.

If there were any doubts that the zombies were caused by a necromancer and not just a resurgence of an almost eradicated disease, there were none anymore.

These things weren't normal, natural zombies.

They were older bodies for one, full skeletons held up only by the green mossy vine thing coiling around their bones. They were appearing out of every nook and cranny of the city, crawling out of sewer grates or just digging themselves out of the dirt by the hundreds.

They were also smarter than your typical zombies. In a few hours, once they'd hunted everything outside with a pulse, they'd start breaking into less secured buildings and dragging people out. Their bites would turn these people into the normal, dull fleshy zombies.

It was clear these skeletons were not caused by some once common disease. Diseases don't just lie in wait for however many decades or centuries most of these skeletons had clearly rotted and then reanimate their hosts randomly.

Not to mention the green stuff was everywhere, growing on the buildings around him. This stuff had its own source that was *not* the long dead bodies. This had been done intentionally, and Techno couldn't wait to get his hands on the culprit.

A group of three of the skeletons and two fresher zombies rounded the corner and spotted Technoblade.

Techno glanced around and saw a rusty ladder leading to a nearby roof. Well, dying from a fall was better than the alternative.

He had to jump to get a grip on the bottom rung of the ladder but managed to pull himself up even as the ladder creaked dangerously under his weight.

By the time he'd hoisted himself up onto the roof, the skeletons were already eyeing (or well "eye"ing since they only had empty sockets) the ladder considerably while the zombies bumbled about. One of them bent down to allow a second to stand on its spine.

"I hate necromancers," Techno spat, grabbing for his bow and an arrow. He shot the one climbing up straight through the eye socket. The one that had been standing next to the two observing rattled angrily at him. It leaned down and grabbed the goo covered arrow from the re-dead one's skull.

Techno ducked as it threw it up at him. It was surprisingly strong considering the lack of muscles.

Schlatt would be the first person Techno ever relished killing, he decided as he turned and looked around the roof.

He decided to jump to the next rooftop over and found a fire escape leading down into an alleyway just as one bony hand appeared on the roof's edge.

He had to jump down the last few feet as the fire escape didn't actually touch the ground. There was one normal zombie, so fresh it was still bleeding from a bite wound on its shoulder. Techno quickly put it out of its misery with a shudder.

The alleyway he'd landed in had an exit on both sides. He went left.

As he neared the end of the alleyway, he caught sight of a blur of movement and raised his weapon towards it. The blur raised a weapon at the same times towards him.

They both blinked in surprise, and then Techno pulled the woman to the side by her arm as the skeleton that had been pursuing her rounded the corner too. He shoved his sword into its head.

"Thanks," she said as it crumpled. She had a long pipe, Techno noted. It wasn't as effective as his sword, but it was an okay weapon.

Techno nodded and without even saying anything about it, they both turned in the opposite direction from where she'd come and ran off together.

While she was no Phil, she kept pace with him surprisingly easily and either was going in the same direction as Techno or had nowhere in particular to go and was content to follow his lead.

Running down the city streets, spiraling from zone 2 to zone 3 was easier with someone else. A 11v2 was much better odds than a 11v1 which made stumbling over larger groups of zombies and skeletons much easier.

They managed to get out of the more downtown zones and back to more residential areas. Techno spotted an old, abandoned train track and had the idea to follow it out of town. With all likelihood, it would lead to towards the trainyard he'd spent years in, and he'd be able to figure out exactly where he was and get out of town at the same time.

The two of them jogged next to the train track, killing any zombie or skeleton they came across along the way. They had to navigate around some fallen trees and went over a sketchy tunnel the tracks went through, but they managed. Their luck ran out in zone somewhere between zone 10 and 11.

Techno probably should have thought about the fact that the dirty water running over the train tracks was a bad sign, but it hadn't been too deep and so he and the woman with him decided to push through.

He realized his mistake when he realized that the water was coming from a watermain break. A watermain break that had apparently been caused by over 20 dead bodies forcing their way up through the dirt and tearing holes in the water supply system as they did.

The two of them ended up surrounded, and while both he and the woman were decent fighters, he didn't like their odds. 22v2 was as bad as 11v1 after all, "Do me a favor," Techno said to her. They'd stepped back into the quickest stream of water. It wasn't too strong, but they hoped it would give them a bit of an advantage if it took any of the skeletons off balance. "If I get bit, stab me in the head immediately."

"What?" she asked.

"Trust me," he said gravely, "it'll be better for the both of us."

"I don't..."

"Just trust me," Techno said.

There wasn't time to finish their conversation because one of them finally stopped sizing them up and stepped forward, it's moss covered legbones stepping into the running water. There was a sharp gasping sound from beside him and Techno saw out of the corner of his eye as the woman raised the arm not holding her weapon towards the skeleton.

The skeleton crumpled to the ground as the moss was almost instantly pulled from its bones. It's remains were washed away by the water.

The other skeletons rattled in confusion and anger around them.

"What was that?" Techno asked the woman, eyes wide.

"It..." the woman said, sounding just as surprised as he did. Her arm fell to her side. "It stepped into the water."

"And?"

"My power is to remove pollutants from water," she said. "Whatever that stuff is, it must count, because the moment it stepped into the water I could feel it, and I just pulled the pollutant out. I didn't know I could do that. That never happened with the regular zombies."

Techno glanced at her and then at the skeletons surrounding them. They were smarter than zombies, but still not smart enough to understand what happened to their comrade could happen to them too. A few more were stepping closer.

"Can you do it again?" Techno asked.

"Maybe," she said. "Probably."

“Alright,” Techno said. “You do that then.”

He stepped forward, closer to the edge of the water, and the skeletons grew more excited. He thought of the traps Kurtis had on his farm. These things weren’t as dull as other zombies, but... He whistled sharply and kicked at the water at his feet. Half of them went feral at the sight and sound and lunged into the water. They all collapsed instantly just like the first, the moss substance holding them up slipping away in the water.

The rest all rattled and backed up, but Techno whistled again, and they seemed to forget the danger, lunging into the water after him. They collapsed as well.

Techno looked back at the woman. “Okay,” he said. “New plan. We follow the water out of town, not the railroad.”

She nodded. “The river’s that way,” she said, pointing East.

Techno nodded and they took off down the nearest street that went in the direction she’d pointed.

They made it to the river only having to kill a couple of zombies and five of the skeletons. From there they stayed in the water or just barely on the shore. It made their progress slower, but anytime any of the many, many skeletons came after them, they just stepped into the water and the woman used her powers to take them down. Any zombies they came up against Techno took care of with his sword.

It was going well, except after a while, the woman’s energy started to obviously wane. Between running and using her powers in a way she was unaccustomed to, she was growing exhausted, not that she was complaining about it even as she ended up dropping her weapon because her hands were shaking too much, and her face started to grow paler every time she used her powers.

She didn’t, however, protest when Techno picked her up and slung her over his shoulder so she wouldn’t have to run anymore. The problem with this was Techno himself was getting tired.

They needed a new plan. They couldn’t keep up this pace all the way out of the city, especially since the number of skeletons was increasing as more and more managed to drag themselves out of the ground.

They needed transport out of the city. Maybe if they could find a car Techno could figure out how to drive without killing them both... or maybe it would take a few deaths on Techno’s part. That’d work too he guessed. Or maybe they could find a boat. Or...

And the universe seemed to be apologizing for the last ~~week~~ hour of his life because Technoblade heard a very familiar sound.

He managed to climb the riverbank with the woman on his back only to see a horse of unknown origins kicking a skeleton’s head in.

That’d work.

Techno whistled to get the horses attention.

The horse looked at him.

He looked at the horse.

“Come here!” he yelled at it.

The horse snorted and trotted over to them.

“How did you do that?” the woman asked in awe.

“I’m good with horses,” Techno said, moving to throw her up onto the horse.

The horse did not startle, but the woman did. “Wait, *I’m* not good with horses,” she said.

“You don’t have to be,” Techno said, easily managing to mount the horse behind her despite the lack of a saddle. (Thank goodness for Deedee’s bareback riding lessons.) He pulled the woman into a better position. She limply allowed him to manhandle her. (He was honestly surprised she was still awake.) “Just hang onto his mane.”

She swallowed and muttered under her breath, but she grabbed ahold of the horse’s mane.

“Go fast and I have a way to get you more grain than you can imagine,” he promised the horse before nudging its sides with his heels.

The horse took off like it understood exactly what he’d said. The woman closed her eyes and leaned forward a bit, but Techno sat straight up, using his legs to keep himself on the horse as he grabbed his bow from his back.

The horse was faster than Techno and the woman had been and much faster than all of the zombies and skeletons were. Techno shot anything that was straight ahead before it could become a problem and they blasted past everything else.

They finally made it to the city boarders on horseback. The wall was unguarded, the heroes likely away fighting in the middle of the city (or they’d decided to have a coffee break knowing them). There was an access door on their side that was luckily large enough for the horse to get through, and they were finally, blessedly out of the city.

They’d been vaguely headed in the direction of the trainyard, so Techno recognized the area and with a light kick, pointed the horse in the right direction for the supplies van.

It was less than a 10-minute ride to where the van was parked, untouched. The horse came to a stop, sides heaving. Techno patted its neck next to the woman’s head and slipped off the horse’s back before reaching up to help the woman off.

She threw up on Techno’s shirt on her way off the horse and ended up retching on her knees.

“Ah,” said Techno awkwardly. He opened the back door of the van and grabbed one of the water bottles. He walked back over to her, opened the lid, and set it next to her in the dirt.

She was breathing heavily in a puddle of her own vomit. “Thanks,” she croaked, reaching for the water bottle. She took a cautious sip.

After a few more moments, she looked up at him.

“I think I’m going to pass out,” she said, and she certainly looked the part.

“Can you pass out inside the van?” Techno asked.

“I can try,” she said. He reached down a hand to help her up and she took it with a groan. He half carried her to the van and then handed her a towel and another bottle of water to wipe off as much of

the throw-up as possible.

“Niki,” the woman said. Techno blinked at her. Oh, a name.

“Techno,” he returned.

“Good to meet you,” she said.

“Yeah, same,” he said. He wasn’t sure if she heard him, her eyes slipping closed without even trying to dab at the vomit. He sighed and took the towel from her limp hand. He’d at least wipe off her face.

Chapter End Notes

Phil (upon returning to the van): Oh! You made a friend?

Techno: Yes. His name is Carl and he's a good horse.

Breakfast

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil should probably stop being surprised by how much Deedee and Kurtis knew, he mused while watching the slow rise and fall of the woman's chest in front of him. She'd been set up in Deedee's bed with an IV that Phil hadn't even realized they'd had (though thinking about how prepared they were for the apocalypse in other respects, he probably should have.)

Both farmers had been impressively efficient with medical care as soon as they understood what was going on. It wasn't anything fancy, more high quality first-aid than anything, but it still startled Phil in the moment. They'd checked her over for everything that didn't necessitate a CT scan and had given her half a strength potion the night before through the IV, but now it was just normal saline.

The woman's name was Niki according to Techno, though Phil himself had yet to speak to her, as she'd been unconscious when Phil had found them. To say that Phil had been surprised by her presence would be an underestimate. The whole ass half-ton racehorse had someone surprised Phil less than the unconscious human woman in the back of the van.

Niki was currently exhibiting all signs of severe power exhaustion which made sense from what Techno had told Phil. She'd apparently discovered her power to remove pollutions from water allowed her to also take down the skeleton monsters that had descended on the city en masse. Considering the fact that Phil had had trouble taking them down with his super strength, that was a very lucky discovery for her and Techno to make.

That being said, discovering a new facet of her power and immediately using it repeatedly especially when she likely hadn't trained any part of her power in combat was a recipe for power exhaustion.

Luckily, it wasn't as bad as it could be. She had a fever and hadn't gained consciousness since Phil had found her and Techno, but Phil had witnessed people with much more severe symptoms of power exhaustion recover with an IV of fluids and a few days' rest. She hadn't even passed out while using her powers according to Techno but had been conscious and lucid (if ill) when they'd arrived at the van.

That was good. She'd wake after she'd gotten some rest. They were unsure how confused and/or panicked she'd be when she woke of course, which was why Phil was currently sitting with her, having relieved Deedee of the duty so the woman could get some sleep in her father's bed after a long night awake watching the girl.

Deedee had also been kind enough to contribute some of her old clothes since Niki's shirt and the knees of her jeans had been crusted with dried vomit by the time they'd gotten back to Kurtis's house. There was still a faint scent of sick-up wafting from her as other than a cursory wipe down of her limbs with a rag, she hadn't been cleaned.

Phil did his best to ignore this as he stared down at the book in his lap. Kurtis had kindly loaned him the book. Unfortunately, Kurtis's estimation of a good book was a book on farming practices, so it was difficult for Phil to keep his attention on it. He'd mostly been thumbing through it, looking at the various pictures and diagrams and trying to keep his mind off the state of things.

It wasn't working very well.

There was less of a knock and more of a warning thump at the door before Kurtis pushed the door open with his shoulder. He was holding a large tray of breakfast food which he set down on the table next to Phil's chair.

"How's she doing?" Kurtis asked.

"The same," Phil said, glancing over at Niki. "She hasn't stirred since I've been in here."

Kurtis grunted an acknowledgment and walked over to the bedside. He grabbed her wrist and felt for her pulse while staring at his watch. After a few seconds, he nodded and stepped back. "Her color's better than it was last night," he noted.

"She'll hopefully wake up soon."

Kurtis nodded and then his eyes flickered to Phil. "Kid's up," he said. "In the shower." He jerked his head at the tray of breakfast. "There's breakfast enough for two there."

"Thank you, Kurtis," Phil said. Kurtis gave him one last nod and left the room.

Phil sighed, opened the book, and then immediately closed it again.

Techno had been... quiet after Phil had, with overwhelming relief and a bit of confusion, found him back at the van with a horse and a passed-out woman. It had been the third time he'd checked the van having not been able to find Techno in the city.

The city had been a disaster. Phil had tried to help where he could, but he really couldn't help, not without risking his own life. Maybe a few years ago he'd have been willing to blindly risk that. Yesterday, he'd known his life would be worth more if he retreated, regrouped with his allies, and figured out what the hell (literally by how it looked) was going on before diving back in. So, here he was.

Here Techno was too.

Techno had ridden his new horse (Carl, Phil had been told) partway back while Phil drove the woman back to the house and got Kurtis and his horse trailer. Other than a brief explanation describing where Niki and Carl had come from, Techno hadn't said a word to Phil or anybody. He'd hosed himself down outside and changed before passing out the night before.

Phil forced himself to take a few sips out of one of the teacups and to nibble on one of the provided pieces of toast, but he didn't really feel hungry. Niki's chest continued to rise and fall steadily, and the book sat heavy in Phil's lap.

It was perhaps 10 minutes later when there was a knock at the door.

"You can come in," Phil said, already knowing who it had to be.

Techno pushed open the door at the invitation. His hair was wet from his shower, and he had on a fresh long-sleeved t-shirt. Though, squinting, Phil realized it was actually one of his own shirts and not one that belonged to the man. There was also an odd speckle of blue something on his face. Phil had noted it the night before but hadn't paid it much mind considering the various other smears of unidentifiable fluids Techno had had on him at the time. The blue, however, was still there this morning unlike the rest.

"Hey Techno," Phil greeted.

Techno didn't respond verbally. Instead, he shuffled over to Phil. He was carrying a brush and when he got close enough, he shoved it into Phil's hand. Phil took it and watched as Techno folded himself down to sit at Phil's feet facing away from him.

Phil didn't comment on his silence. He instead reached out to touch the back of Techno's head with the hand not holding the brush. He let his hand linger slightly longer than was necessary. The quick sliver of nonessential physical contact was strictly for himself and not for the boy in front of him, so he only took a moment.

Techno had never been and still was not a fan of physical touch. It was permissible during necessary things like training and medical care and it was permissible for this, but otherwise he did not allow physical affection.

Phil didn't know why he even allowed the hair braiding. Habit, he supposed. Techno certainly knew how to care for and braid his own hair now. In fact, he brushed it out himself a majority of the time before coming to Phil. Yet, every morning, without fail, he did come to have Phil braid his hair.

This morning was no different even though it was *different*.

Phil set about his task after his stolen moment of affection with careful steadiness. Phil understood almost instantly why Techno hadn't tackled his own hair that morning. It was a mess from him having hosed off and fallen asleep on his wet hair the night before.

Phil was gentle and slow as he untangled the mess. He couldn't help but think back to the first time he'd brushed out Techno's hair. It was not nearly as messy today. It couldn't be with only one day of him being lax with his care.

That was not the only thing different from back then. Things had changed so much. Techno was older and his shoulders seemed twice the width they were in memory (though Phil's recollections might be embellished). His hair was so much longer and if they were both to stand, Techno would be taller than Phil.

Phil no longer worried Techno would snap if pushed too hard in the wrong direction. He was no longer a prison guard to a half feral and fully confused teenager. Instead, they were... friends, partners, comrades in arms. They were... it was hard pinpoint a word that truly described their relationship.

Phil knew him in a way he hadn't before. He thought he probably knew him in a way he hadn't known anyone before.

Phil knew how liable he was to push himself to injury during training and how to account for that. He knew he was better with animals than he was with people. (The newly acquired horse just one example.) He knew sarcasm came naturally to him even if he'd never had a chance to use it before Phil and he knew how to tell when it was sarcasm and when it was genuine misunderstanding. And he knew...

Phil knew.

Technoblade wasn't going to say it out loud, but Phil knew.

Phil had always wondered if he'd even be able to tell if/when the day came. What with the way Techno was quiet in general and with the way he hid every injury or discomfort he faced like a cat that would rather crawl off to die quietly than show weakness, it would be easy to miss.

But no, Phil could tell.

Phil let the silence hang between them until the brush began to run smoothly through his hair.

“There’s blue in your hair too,” Phil noted absently. There was one light spot that had been hidden by how messy Techno’s hair had been, but it was a rather stark contrast against his now brushed out white hair. Phil set the brush aside to touch the discolored strands. It wasn’t sticky or anything; the hair felt exactly the same as the untouched locks around it.

“Won’t come off,” Techno said. “Noticed a few more on my shoulder and neck.” He reached up to pull aside the neck of his shirt so Phil could see two small smudges of blue near his collarbone.

“What is it?” Phil asked.

Techno paused. He pulled his shirt back into place and was silent for a few moments. “A side effect of using my powers, I think,” he eventually said.

“Oh?” Phil said, trying to maintain a certain level of casualness to his tone so as not to scare him off, but inside he felt his heart skip a beat.

“I never really had a chance to study myself after using them before,” he said, “but I think once after that time in prison I can remember there being something blue in my hair.”

“I see,” Phil said levelly. He started to section off Techno’s hair in silence after that. He decided to do a simple braid today. He didn’t trust his fingers to remain steady enough for something more intricate.

He was still raw, Phil thought, from Bad’s attack. Wilbur was on his mind, not that he really ever wasn’t, but it felt like someone had rubbed sandpaper over a wound just starting to scar.

Wilbur was dead.

And Techno had died.

“Er, uh, Phil?” Techno asked.

“Fuck me,” Phil muttered back. He dropped the strands of hair in his hand, ruining the progress he’d made so far. “Fuck.” He swiped violently at his face, more slapping at the tears than wiping them away.

“Uh...”

“Give me a second,” Phil said.

“Okay.”

Phil closed his eyes and took a moment to breathe. He heard rustling but didn’t pay it any mind.

After forcing himself to calm down, he opened his eyes again to see that Techno had turned around. He looked rather silly like that, a full grown man all crumpled up at Phil’s feet. They met eyes briefly.

Phil sighed.

“You have to tell me Techno,” Phil said, “when it happens.”

“Why?” Techno asked blankly.

“I want to know when you’re hurt.”

“I’m not hurt,” Techno protested.

“There are different types of hurt,” Phil said, “and yes you are.”

There was a long silence.

“It wasn’t a bad one,” Techno said after a moment. “Very quick. I barely noticed and it was only the one.”

“Are you lying to me?” Phil asked, skeptically.

“I swear it was only the one,” Techno said.

Phil scrutinized him for any sign of a lie for a long moment. And perhaps Phil was a fool to believe him or perhaps he was just wise.

“It still matters to me,” Phil said. “I don’t care how quick or painless it was. I always want to know.”

Techno looked up at him, head tilted slightly. “You’re a strange man, Phil,” he said.

It was not anywhere near a promise, but it probably didn’t matter. Phil had a feeling he’d know each time anyway.

Phil had to look away from him then. His eyes fell on Niki still sleeping peacefully in Deedee’s bed. He’d have to thank her when she woke. “Make sure to eat breakfast,” he said. “Kurtis brought some for both of us.”

Chapter End Notes

Phil: Techno doesn't want to be touched.

Techno: *vibrating out of his skin because he really needs a hug right now but doesn't understand that fact, so he just steals Phil's clothes and lets Phil brush his hair* I concur.

Ghostbur: *in the closest thing to physical pain he can get* You're both so stupid.

Coffee and 12 Cookies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The skeletons proved themselves far smarter than the zombies very quickly. Though Techno himself had already had quite the preview of this fact, it was only emphasized by the string of VAND alerts that began coming through into the afternoon.

The city itself was on complete lockdown with very little information being given out by its current leaders. Notably what little was handed out was almost exclusively given by Mayor Werner. Bad showed up in the background of a few of the televised reports but said nothing. More telling was the absence of the third member of the trio.

Schlatt, the self-admitted necromancer, was suspiciously absent in the wake of the sudden skeleton attack. The skeleton attack that had begun when Bad was losing a fight to Phil.

Anyone who believed a word out of Werner's mouth was an idiot. Thankfully most people seemed to agree. At least, those not currently in the city seemed to agree. It was difficult to tell the opinion of the city's citizens as other than the reports from Werner little information was getting out.

What little information did leak was not pleasant. Some footage from various unknown sources had managed to get to the press outside the city. Those news stations were now constantly showing and discussing the violent and terrifying videos and photos they'd managed to get their hands on.

The communities outside the city, mostly farm workers and small towns, had already been nervous about the zombie outbreak in the city, but most people had trusted the walls to hold at least enough to give them adequate warning if something went wrong. They'd probably been correct with these predictions...when it was just zombies.

The skeletons were already tearing down the inner-city walls with an unprecedent efficiency. Those not stuck in the city, but nearby were going to have decide if and when they were going to evacuate. It was also becoming breaking news internationally. Up until recently, the city's information lock-down had been solid enough that most of the world just saw it as an unfortunate outbreak of a virus that was being contained by heroes. Now there was a risk it would become uncontained, and everyone was starting to notice.

Techno personally knew the outer walls would hold for at least a few more days, but after that no one knew what could happen.

Kurtis had already been updating his defenses upon hearing Phil's account of the skeletons and his progress only picked up when he saw a few of the videos. Currently he and Phil were constructing more defenses around the farm boarders, and Deedee had been tasked with going into town for more supplies before everything was gone and to extend an invitation to those in town who weren't going to evacuate the area altogether to pool their resources and potentially even come to live on the farm.

That left Techno to sit with an unconscious Niki since Kurtis, Deedee, and Phil all agreed he was "still recovering." Techno wasn't sure why. All he'd done physically was go on a more intense jog than usual the day before.

Other than when Bea had needed to be let out half an hour before, Techno had been sitting on the chair in Deedee's room playing Luigi's Mansion on his Nintendo. Bea was currently just as if not more unconscious than the woman on the bed considering the woman on the bed had been shifting every so often for the past 10 minutes. If he poked the dog with his foot, she'd let out a soft woof without waking.

"Are you playing a video game?" a rough voice asked, pulling Techno's attention up to the woman he'd been watching over. Her eyes were open, and she was squinting at him.

Techno quickly paused the game and closed the Nintendo, setting it aside. "Yes," he answered.

She glanced around. "You have power here?" she asked upon seeing the lamp that was on next to him.

"We're outside of the city," Techno explained. "About 30 miles out."

She looked surprised. "I'd thought..." she said. "I knew the worst of it was in the city, but I'd assumed the surrounding areas were hit hard too."

"Uh, no," Techno. "It's pretty much just the city, at least for now. I'm not sure what will happen with those skeleton monsters. At the moment the walls are holding, but no one knows for how long."

"That's..." she said. "It's strange to think life's normal out here."

"Not quite normal," Techno said.

"Not the apocalypse though."

"No," Techno agreed.

"So, what exactly happened?" Niki asked.

"You passed out from power exhaustion pretty quickly after getting to the van. Phil drove you here after he found us."

She gave him a confused look and Techno recalled that she hadn't actually met Phil and had no idea who he was. Yet, before he could explain, the confusion melted into something more like curiosity.

"Phil," she said. "As in Philza?"

Techno was confused for a moment as to why she'd added an extra syllable to Phil's name and why she said it like it had some type of special meaning. Yet, he suddenly recalled something from those far away fuzzy days of confusion before Phil had quit being a hero and fled with Techno to the trainyard. On occasion other heroes had called Phil "Philza." It had puzzled him then, but now he concluded that "Philza" must have been Phil's hero moniker.

"Yes," Techno answered. "At least, he used to be."

"There have been rumors," she said, "but..." she trailed off and reached up to rub her head.

"Are you alright?" Techno asked.

"You don't possibly have a source of caffeine here, do you?"

"Kurtis has coffee downstairs."

She nodded and moved to swing her legs off the side of the bed. She seemed to only then notice the IV in her arm. "This anything important?" she asked.

"Just saline now," Techno told her.

She peeled off the medical tape holding it secured against her arm and then pulled out the IV. She grabbed a tissue from the box next to the bed and nonchalantly pressed it against the needle mark left behind.

Then, she shoved herself off the bed. She wobbled for a moment and had to catch herself on the nightstand, but then she shook herself and straightened.

"Where's downstairs?" she asked once she'd opened the door.

"Left," Techno said, "and then left again at the bottom of the stairs to get to the kitchen."

"Cool." She walked left and Techno followed her. She held onto the staircase railing for dear life as she almost pitched forward a few times but managed to get to the first floor without cracking her head open.

Once steady on flat ground, she turned left into the kitchen.

"It's in that cupboard to the right of the sink," Techno informed her, pointing.

"Thanks," she said. She had to stand on her tip-toes and hop a bit to reach it. She was shorter than Phil, so she was quite a bit shorter than Techno, but she didn't seem inclined to let that stop her. She studied the label on the plastic coffee container after retrieving it.

It seemed to pass inspection as she popped the lid off and turned towards the stove. There was a tea kettle on the back burner which she grabbed.

"There is a coffee machine," Techno pointed out, though he doubted she'd missed it since it had been right in front of her when she'd reached for the coffee.

She waved off his statement and walked over to the sink, filling the kettle with water. Once it was filled, she tilted it so some of the water flowed out of the spout back into the sink. She suddenly gasped as she did so, and Techno just barely managed to catch her before she banged her head against the kitchen counter. The kettle clattered into the sink.

"I," she said after a long pause to recover, "probably shouldn't use my powers to purify coffee water right now."

"You have severe power exhaustion," Techno said.

She groaned and reached out to grab the kitchen countertop. Techno released her when she seemed somewhat steady on her feet.

The kettle had fallen into the sink, but had stayed upright and thus was still filled with water. "Well," she said with an amused huff. "Might as well not let my efforts go to waste." She picked up the kettle and moved over to the stove. Techno could hear the water slosh as her hands shook violently. She turned on the stove and then leaned against the counter.

"Could you maybe get me a couple of mugs and coffee filters?" she asked.

“Sure,” Techno agreed, moving to grab what she’d requested. He also saw a plate of a dozen cookies on the counter. He figured whoever had made the cookies had forgotten about them in the chaos, so he picked up the plate. Techno was sure Kurtis or Deedee wouldn’t mind if Techno fed them to Niki. She probably needed a bit of food anyway.

When he turned back, she’d moved to sit in one of the chairs at the kitchen table.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile when he set the cups down in front of her. She grabbed a cookie when he set the plate between them and took a bite. It was silent then for a bit. Techno watched with interest as she put the coffee filters over the top of the mugs and placed a bit of ground coffee into each. Techno had never seen anyone do that. He’d only ever seen someone put filters into the coffee machine.

“So,” she said once she was done. “How’d it all turn out?”

“For us,” Techno said, “fine. Phil and Kurtis, the owner of this place, are putting up more defenses on the property in case the skeletons get over the city walls. Kurtis’s daughter Deedee is in town getting supplies and maybe recruiting people.”

“And everyone in the city?”

“Not great,” Techno told her. “Whatever those skeleton things are, they’re smarter and faster. There’s been some footage that’s leaked outside the city. It’s not looking too good.”

She closed her eyes. “That’s what I’d figured,” she said. “At least we managed to take some of them out. I don’t know if it’ll help in the end, but maybe it’ll give someone a chance.”

“Maybe,” Techno said, though really he doubted it. They’d taken out dozens but there had to be hundreds, maybe even thousands. Though the fact that they’d been able to do even that much did give some hope for the future. After all, the death toll was probably high and growing, but surely some people were still alive in that city. “Maybe with your powers we could eventually do more.”

She glanced up at him. “You’re those vigilantes, aren’t you?” she asked. “The ones with the food and supplies? The ones that have been making it over the walls?”

“We are,” Techno confirmed. “Kurtis and Deedee have food stockpiled from when the city stopped letting them sell there, and Phil can fly, so getting in and out isn’t nearly as difficult for us as everyone else.”

“The heroes have been calling him the Angel of Death,” she mused. “Which is kind of ironic considering all anyone’s seen him do is kill zombies and pass out food. The others had been saying it might be Philza, the ex-superhero, because of his wings, but no one could be sure.”

“Who are the others?” Techno asked.

“Other people like me,” she said. “I guess we’re probably classed as vigilantes too. There aren’t many of us, but we run into each other from time to time and share what information we can get.”

“You’ve been fighting?” Techno asked, remembering her skills even before she’d discovered the new use of her powers.

“Well, someone has to,” Niki said. Techno hadn’t really thought about city citizens fighting back from within the walls. He’d only ever thought of them in the abstract as victims, bystanders, or

perpetrators. Yet, Niki was at least one example of the citizens not being sheep, and apparently there were more.

“I agree,” Techno said.

The tea kettle interrupted them then with its whistling.

“Do you mind getting that?” Niki asked him. “I’ll hopefully be less wobbly after the cookie hits my system and I have caffeine, but I don’t want to pour boiling water over myself.”

Techno nodded and got up to grab the kettle. He watched her pour a bit of water into the coffee filter and then pause. After a bit, she poured more water into the filter and let it slowly drain into the cup, keeping her eyes on the progress and pouring more water in every so often.

“You said maybe we could do more,” Niki said, kettle still in hand and eyes still on the coffee mugs. “Are you asking me to join you?”

“We have supplies,” Techno said. “You have a power that could actually stop those things.”

“I passed out before even making a dent,” she pointed out.

“On how much food and rest?” Techno asked. “And with how much experience using that part of your powers?”

She poured a bit more water in the cups and then set the kettle down. She glanced up at him. “Even with that in mind, I don’t know if I’d be a lot of help. Even if I could train my powers enough to be effective eventually, we probably won’t have time.”

“Be a little help then,” Techno said.

She gave a seemingly startled blink and then grinned slightly. “I think I could do that at least.”

“Besides,” Techno said. “Phil has trained many heroes before. He trained me. You might be surprised how quickly you can improve if you let him help.”

She nodded. “It’s worth a try.”

Then, she took the coffee filters out of the mugs and slid one over to him.

“Here,” she said. “Try this.”

~~~

Phil returned to the house about 30 minutes later. He paused in the entrance to the kitchen watching Techno and Niki chatting over their mugs of coffee and an empty plate for a few second before interrupting.

“Hey, uh,” said Phil. “What’s going on here?”

Techno looked over at him. He slowly set his coffee mug down on the table. “Phil,” he said, very seriously. “You make horrible coffee.”

“What?” Phil asked, with a blink.

“Your coffee,” Techno said. “You make it very poorly.”

“You’ve drunk it every morning for the past 4 years like it was the last cup of consumable liquid on the planet.”

“I like coffee,” Techno said, “but this is *good* coffee.”

Phil didn’t seem to know what to say to that.

“Niki is bringing even more to this alliance than expected,” Techno said, and heard Niki muffle a giggle into her mug.

Phil shook his head and turned to her. “Hello,” he said. “It’s good to see you awake. My name is Phil.”

“Niki,” she returned with an easy smile. “Nice to meet you.”

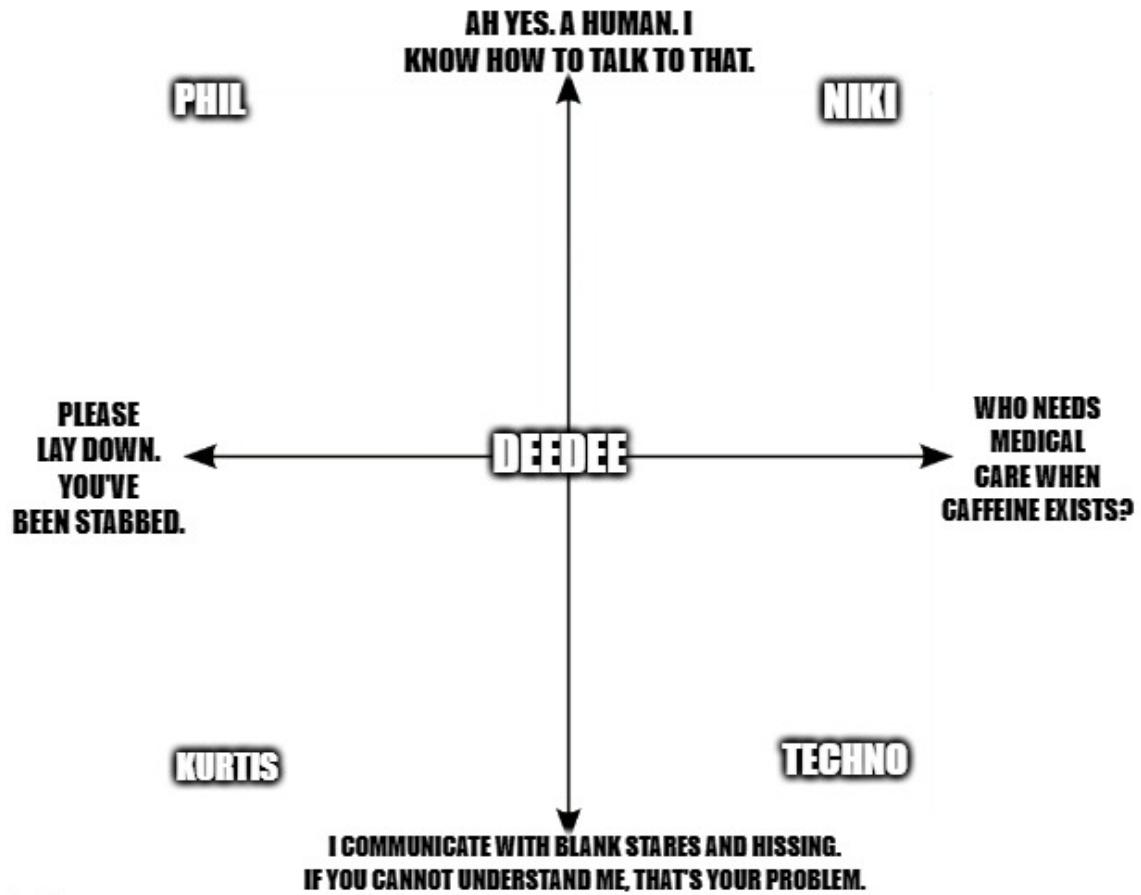
Phil’s eyebrows drew together suddenly. “Should you even be out of bed?” Phil questioned. “Has Deedee looked over you yet?”

Niki shrugged in response. “Coffee was the priority.”

Yes, Techno thought as a pained look crossed Phil’s face. Niki was a valuable ally indeed.

#### Chapter End Notes

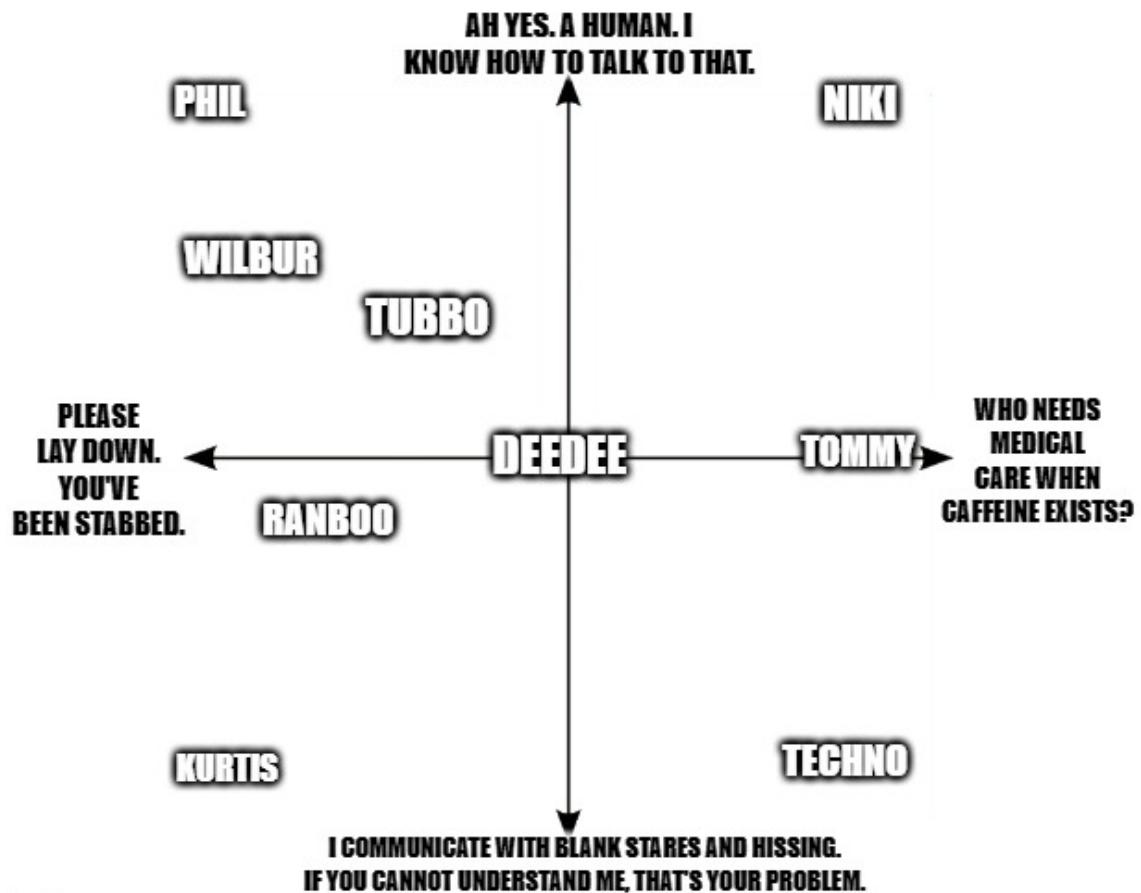
An alignment chart for our zombie apocalypse team. (Bea is not on this chart because she is not allowed to have caffeine and is thus disqualified.)



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(And if anyone wants the alignment chart with a few bonus characters...)



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# Losing Hands

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I will never forgive you for this,” Phil said to Niki while frowning at the hand of cards he’d been dealt.

Niki smiled, a crinkle at the corner of her eyes. She was clearly pleased with her creation of a weapon of mass destruction.

“Bet or fold Phil,” Techno said, face somehow more blank than it had been the first time Phil had seen him being interviewed through a one-way mirror. “This is getting boring.”

“Bullshit. You’re enjoying this,” Phil accused.

Technoblade simply glanced at the cards in his own hand and titled his head, expression still blank.

“Why would you think teaching him about gambling was a good idea?”

Niki shrugged. She’d already folded but didn’t seem too torn up about it. “I was bored,” she said.

“If you have that much energy, I should make you run more laps tomorrow,” Phil said darkly.

Niki just threw her head back and laughed, calling his bluff. They had been training together for months now and Phil had very carefully designed a program that was strenuous but wouldn’t harm or exhaust her completely. She ate enough for two and a half people every night at dinner, but she still had the energy to torture Phil by proxy, apparently.

“You have a losing hand, Phil,” Techno told him.

“You don’t know that,” Phil said. He had a pair of 2s and a pair of 6s. He *could* win with that, except he had absolutely no inkling about what Technoblade was thinking. He’d already managed to win 5 rounds. “I could have a great hand.”

“Prove it then,” Techno replied, sounding bored.

Phil scowled at him and tossed a \$500 dollar monopoly bill into the center. (Kurtis and Deedee didn’t have any poker chips, so they’d made do.)

“Your optimism is admirable and unfounded,” Technoblade said.

“Oh, fuck off,” Phil said. “What do you even have?”

He reached over and snatched the cards from Techno’s hand before he could put them down to show them.

“A straight,” Phil grumbled, unhappily. “How do you always get the best hand?”

“Skill,” Techno said, his blank face finally splitting into a smirk. He took the monopoly money in the center of the table and began to count it. “Want to play again?”

“You already have all of the money,” Phil said dryly.

“Currency is simply a representation of available resources,” Technoblade said. “You could easily liquify more funds.”

“You mean I could offer to do more chores for you.”

“In this case, yes.”

“You’re already holding a handful of doing the dishes for a month. I’m not playing anymore.”

“I think cleaning Carl’s stall is worth at least \$2000 monopoly dollars,” Technoblade said.

“I am not cleaning up your horse’s shit,” Phil said.

“Not even for \$2000?” Techno asked.

“No.”

“Shame.”

“It’s okay,” Niki said. “We can still hustle Kurtis and Deedee when they get home.”

“Do not,” said Phil.

“\$1,000 for your silence, Phil,” Techno offered.

Phil shook his head and got to his feet. He groaned as he pushed himself off the ground, his muscles protesting moving after the running and sparing they’d done earlier that day. “I’m going to go for a flight,” he said. “I’ll be back in time for dinner.”

“Okay,” said Techno, flipping idly through his stack of monopoly money.

“Don’t scam Kurtis,” Phil said sternly. “He’s feeding you.”

Techno rolled his eyes and Phil sighed. Niki smiled at him innocently, but Phil was starting not to trust that. He decided there was nothing to be done with those two and turned to leave.

The farm had been even more fortified since the skeleton disaster in the city. Most people within 50 miles of the city had evacuated the area at this point, but some had stayed. Those that had stayed were of a certain type, mostly stubborn old people. Most if not all of those who stayed had pooled their resources, making Kurtis’ farm a make-shift base of operations. About half of Kurtis’s remaining neighbors were actually living on the farm now. The rest stayed home tending their own crops and animals but came over often to help with preparing the farm for a possible onslaught. If and when the quarantine of the city broke, it had been decided they’d all make their last stand here since it was the most prepared place around.

Phil had to give it to stubborn old people. They walked with canes, but they also knew how to build walls and traps better than anyone. Phil was glad he had wings, else he’d need a map to keep himself away from the many traps at this point.

He did have wings however, which meant that checking the boarders was much easier for him than for everyone else. He was a familiar sight by now and a few people working in the fields (either tending them or putting barbed wire all over them) waved at him as he flew over their heads.

He swooped around the borders of the farm. It was starting to resemble more of a compound than a farm at this point if he was being honest. Once he'd carefully checked the now familiar outer walls for any issues, he decided he had time to indulge in a longer flight today. He hadn't had much of a chance recently, busy with Niki's training.

It was nice to clear his head, especially considering things were about to get even more complicated in less than 48 hours. They'd been planning carefully and gathering supplies over the past few months. Phil had done his best to train Niki's powers to be able to sustain her for much longer, though it was difficult at times without having something to truly test it on. Still, Phil had his tricks and he trusted that she'd be strong enough to hold her own for quite some time given adequate water supplies. They'd regrouped and became stronger after the skeleton attack. So, now it was time to act.

He hadn't realized that his wings were following his thoughts until he was at the city borders.

Phil was familiar with the wall he landed on by now. He was the only person who could do reconnaissance with relative safety, and he'd been scouting out the different outer zones of the city quite often. This wall looked over what the heroes designated zone 13. It was one of the smaller zones and surprisingly intact (as much as anything was) considering its neighbor, zone 12, had been all but leveled in the first days of the zombie siege.

There were no signs of life (or death for that matter) within eyesight, though Phil had seen a few zombies and skeletons in the past when scouting the area.

He had to date never seen any proof that hinted the entire zone hadn't just become a large, walled, cemetery. It was a sobering thought; it was a sobering sight: large apartment buildings likely with no living residents and corner stores with broken windows.

He wasn't sure how long he stayed there, eyes searching for some sign of life before he finally did see some movement. Unfortunately, it wasn't from the ground below, but from above.

He tensed, watching the figure approaching through the air, unsure if it had spotted him yet. He couldn't recognize any of its features, but he could tell by the color that it wasn't Bad at the very least.

They were much closer by the time they clearly spotted Phil, close enough that Phil could make a guess of who it was. It made him hesitate.

They hesitated too upon spotting him and then moved closer at a sedate enough pace that Phil didn't think it was any form of attack. The sound of rushing wind confirmed to him who it must be before his eyes did.

She landed on the wall near him. "Phil," she said. The tone of the greeting was far more cordial than the last he'd gotten from an ex-colleague.

Phil regarded her for a moment longer than was perhaps polite. "Puffy."

"You're alive," she said.

"Did you expect me not to be?" he asked.

"Expecting anyone to be alive at this point is asking a lot," she said.

He inclined his head. "Fair enough."

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

Instead of answering, Phil returned the question. “What are you?”

“I...” she said. She hesitated and grimaced slightly before smoothing out her expression. “I’m leaving,” she said.

“Leaving?” Phil repeated. “The city?”

“The continent if I can manage it,” Puffy said, seemingly more to herself than to him.

“Why?” Phil asked, curiously.

“Why?” she said with a laugh. “I think that’s pretty obvious.”

“Why *now*?”

She hesitated once again. “There’s something wrong with Bad,” she said after a moment.

“I did pick that much up,” Phil said dryly, but she shook her head.

“No,” she said. “You don’t understand, Phil. He’s... not himself. He hasn’t been himself since he came out of retirement, but I... I didn’t see it. *I wasn’t myself*. None of us have been in a very long time, but something’s changed.” She looked past him away from the city. “I’m getting out now before it changes back.”

“What?” Phil asked, confused. “What are you talking about?”

She glanced at him. “That is the million-dollar question, and I don’t actually know the answer to it. I just know right now Schlatt’s gone.”

“Schlatt’s *gone*?” Phil asked, his wings ruffling in surprise. That was completely new information and worrying for their plans depending on why.

“Yeah,” Puffy confirmed. “No one knows why he left. He just reportedly walked off into the horde one day and never came back.”

“Dead?”

“I don’t know,” Puffy said. “Maybe, but probably not. At least not from the zombies. He probably made those. Right?”

The hesitance in her tone while saying it made Phil’s face scrunch up. “Yes, Puffy. Obviously. He made them.”

“No,” she said waving her hands around. “Not obviously! I...” She stopped and put her hands on either side of her head above the ears. “There’s something wrong with my head,” she said. “I don’t... nothing makes sense.”

“Okay,” Phil said, gentling his tone a bit. He reached forward to put a hand on her shoulder and despite him not being particularly sudden about it, she jumped and then peered up at him. “What do you know?”

She looked up at him, eyes wide. “There’s a man in the mayor’s tower,” she divulged, voice quiet like she was telling him a secret even though there was no one for miles around to overhear them. “He has a gunshot wound straight through his skull. He follows Bad around and Bad *talks* to him like there’s

nothing wrong, and that's the thing. I didn't... *no one* realized there was anything wrong. I ate lunch with them last week and I didn't even... It just didn't even register as anything but normal, but he's *dead* and no one seems to be able to process that fact, least of all Bad."

"Mind control," Phil concluded.

She blinked at him like somehow the thought hadn't even occurred to her. "Probably," she said slowly after a few seconds, "but not any kind I've seen or heard of before. I was specifically trained to identify and resist mind control, but it still got me. I don't know... I don't *understand*."

"And then what changed?" Phil asked.

"I'm not sure," Puffy said. "I think... I think it had to do with Scintilla. Or at least, he was the first to break through whatever control has been over us. He definitely broke orders. The skeletons were starting to break apart the outer walls and he went against orders to stop them. He ended up dying, but I think it set off a chain reaction. Then Schlatt disappeared and the mayor went into a rage and killed the city treasurer out of nowhere which made people uncomfortable, but not as uncomfortable as we should have been. I don't know what finally flipped the switch, but one moment I was walking around in a daze and the next I was thinking about how no one had bothered to pick up the treasurer's corpse and wondered why it wasn't like the other corpse walking around. Then all of a sudden, I realized how wrong all of that was."

"So, you left," Phil concluded.

"I did," she said.

"And that's why you're here."

"Yes," she confirmed. "And you?"

"I'm doing reconnaissance," he said, though it was a bit of a lie since he hadn't really been doing any tonight.

"Reconnaissance for what?" she asked.

Phil turned slightly to stare down into the city below. "In less than 48 hours," he said, "we're planning to take back zone 13. We're going to reinforce the walls, kill anything dead inside, and evacuate anything living inside."

"There's nothing living inside," Puffy said almost immediately.

"Maybe not," he agreed. "Probably not."

"Then why?"

"What else is there to do?" Phil asked.

"Run," she suggested.

"No," Phil said immediately. "Not me."

"It's too late, Phil," Puffy said with a shake of her head. "There's nothing left to fight for. You should just leave too."

There was a long moment of silence, and Phil still found himself looking for life below despite how many times he hadn't seen it there.

"I don't think I believe that," he finally said.

She did not reply, and he said nothing himself for a while.

Then he turned to face her. "We picked up a vigilante recently," Phil said. "She said there's more people like her out there. It's possible they all died in the skeleton attack, but maybe some didn't. We have to try."

"You are a better man than me then," Puffy said.

"You could join us," Phil suggested.

She paused. It seemed like she hadn't even thought to consider that as an option.

"In fact," Phil said, an idea suddenly occurring to him. "Your powers would actually be very useful if you're willing."

Her mouth opened, but she hesitated. "I don't know if it's worth it," she said.

"But what if it is?"

He ended up getting back late for dinner, mostly because Puffy's form of flight was not nearly as fast as Phil's.

Techno, Niki, Kurtis, and Deedee were already seated at the table when they got there.

"I found someone else who's willing to join us," Phil said when they walked in through the backdoor. "This is Puffy. She's an old friend."

The group at the table seemed a bit surprised at the suddenness of their entry. Technoblade was the first to speak.

"Nice to meet you," he said. Phil would be impressed by his social prowess if he hadn't said that exact phrase with that exact intonation every time he'd met someone new over the past few months. Also, if he hadn't already met her.

"We've, uh, met before actually," Puffy said. She seemed surprised by Techno's presence as though she'd forgotten the little detail of Phil running off with him. Perhaps she had. Or maybe she had thought about Techno being around but hadn't anticipated him speaking.

Techno stared at her blankly.

"Back at the Guild," Phil told him. "She was sort of your psychiatrist."

"They gave me one of those?" Techno asked, eyebrows raised.

"Sort of," Phil said.

"Huh," Techno shrugged. He glanced at Puffy again. "I don't really remember much from that time. I wasn't doing well."

With that, he went back to his baked potato.

“Well,” Puffy said. “I’m glad to see you’re... doing better now.”

“So, you know Techno,” Phil said, pointing. “Well, maybe you didn’t know his name. Then there’s Kurtis and Deedee who own the farm.” They both greeted her. “And last, we have Niki. I think the two of you might work well together.”

Niki glanced at him, a polite smile of greeting still on her face.

“Puffy has the power to control the weather.”

#### Chapter End Notes

How many decades will it take for Phil to realize Techno is counting cards? Around 2.

Until then, if Techno ever doesn't want to do chores... he knows what to do.

(Family game nights are hell.)

## Zone 13

### Chapter Notes

There is quite a bit of violence and some slight gore in the chapter. Be warned.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Thunder cracked, the noise still fading as the sound of hoofs striking the pavement started, slowly at first but quickly picking up speed to a gallop. There had been no sign of rain minutes before, but by the time Carl's front hoofs met the faded stop lines of the first intersection they were being pelted by raindrops.

The sudden rain and sudden horse had already drawn the attention of a few nearby undead, but Techno knew they were about to draw much more. Carl responded to Techno like they shared the same mind as he maneuvered them into the best position to avoid the first wave. Niki, however, was an awkward presence at Techno's back, one of her arms gripping his waist too tight and, he imagined, her legs gripping Carl's sides too tight. Techno knew exactly when she was going to push the button and guided Carl left and up onto the sidewalk right as she did.

The old boom box Deedee had donated was turned up to a point where the starting notes of "Staying Alive" almost drowned out the clomping of hoofs.

It was an ironic song choice suggested by Niki and it was still somehow funny even now.

Technoblade had given Niki a nondescript explanation of his powers before today and had requested that if anything went wrong (especially anything involving a zombie bite) that she shoot without hesitation. He could feel the gun she had strapped to her hip pressing up against him when she shifted. She was a good friend.

Carl was fast, but he could not outrun all of the zombies and skeletons in this zone when they were being drawn to them in mass. Really, the point wasn't to run anyway. The point was to gather them all into one centralized location and kill them quickly. They were closing in both in the front and the back by now, but luckily the torrential downpour had already covered the streets in a sheet of water.

"You can get the zombies too if they're cut up enough," Techno yelled over the sound of rain, music, and ravenous groans. It was a new discovery, but if enough water could get into the open wounds of the more fleshy undead, Niki could draw out the virus from them like she did with the skeletons.

She didn't question his statement, not that she really had time, because Technoblade was jumping off Carl's back, sword baring down as he used his inertia to drive it through the decay softened heads of two zombies in one swing. There were two splashes, one as Niki lobbed the boombox away from them and one as Techno landed on his feet, and one squelch as he pulled the sword out of the heads. He immediately stabbed the head of another corpse. He stepped over a toppling skeleton and lashed out with the sword again. The boom box was still playing even after being thrown into the water (Deedee had not been lying when she'd said that thing could probably survive an atomic bomb) and the zombies seemed confused by the mounting chaos. The skeletons were too busy crumbling to care.

Still, even with all of their advantages, even with the loud music and Niki's powers. Even with every body that was downed making a splash and the rain obscuring the zombie's vision and sense of smell, it was almost impossible to not be bit with the sheer number of them.

The zombies resorted to biting at everything around them and Techno responded in kind, slashing wildly at everything with little form. Even if they weren't headshots, he just needed to inflict as much damage as possible.

The skeletons in range of Niki had all fallen, and she clearly recalled his shouted information as one of the zombies Techno's sword had gutted suddenly collapsed. The other more damaged ones quickly followed suit, giving Techno at least some breathing room. He did not pause, but pressed the advantage, feet stepping over and around the already twice dead in an intricate dance. He stabbed down suddenly to slice through the head of one zombie that had been downed but not killed without even glancing at it.

Lightning streaked across the sky, illuminating the bloody massacre at his feet in the moment before thunder cracked again. One of the zombies slipped on its fallen comrade while looking up at the sky. Its eyes were still open and staring upwards after Techno sliced off its head.

A group had gathered at the boombox, and Techno left them alone for now, far more concerned with the ones close enough to realize he was the more valuable prey. Niki would still be on Carl's back, Techno knew. She had a gun and a sword of her own, but her job was not to be in the fray but on the outskirts taking out anything that got just injured enough to be vulnerable to her powers.

Technoblade was practically alone until an arrow pierced the skull of one of the undead near him.

It was foolish to think that meant safety; he still did.

More arrows rained down nearby, and Techno adjusted his grip on his sword. Phil was done with his main task of flying to and securing the inner walls. Now he was able to provide backup. He continued to shoot arrows at anything that got too near Techno or Niki's blind spots from above.

They actually started to make a dent in the horde. Phil's aim was sharp, and he had plenty of arrows and the space he afforded Techno left room for strategy. Niki began to manually pick off ones from the side as they were mostly all focused on the chaos near Techno and not on Niki.

Before Techno knew it, he was surrounded by a pile of unmoving corpses only.

Phil swooped down and landed deftly in one of the least bloodied areas of the street. Techno began picking his way over to him. He whistled for Carl and Niki fell forward to clutch his neck in surprise as he began trotting over to them.

"Is everyone alright?" Phil asked.

"Yeah," Niki replied while Techno nodded.

Phil stared at him for a long moment. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Techno replied.

"You have blue on your face."

"I need a shower," Techno said, looking away from him.

“What?” Niki joked. “Not wet enough yet?” She was not as covered in blood as Techno was, but she still had quite a bit on herself. Additionally, all three of them were soaked to the bone with water. The rain began to slow as he thought about it.

“We should get cleaned up before the next part,” Phil agreed. “Even without the small risk of a contact zombie infection,” Techno grimaced at the thought. “We still don’t want to kill any survivors we find from shock.”

Techno nodded. They were nowhere near done with their efforts to take back this part of the city, but the worst was hopefully over. Now that they had killed all of the undead roving outdoors, they planned to go into every building to clear it and search for any survivors. The goal was a zombie free area of the city by the time they were done. Puffy landed next to Phil and grimaced at the sight of Techno.

But first a shower.

~~~~

Clearing the outdoor area had been dangerous chaos, but it had been fast. Clearing the buildings was a much slower process. They had to be thorough to make sure nothing living or dead was inside, and then they reinforced the doors and windows to make sure nothing wandered in after they were done with it.

A few volunteers from the farm went around the outside areas now that they were mostly cleared and took care of anything undead that had been too incapacitated to come after them at the beginning. Techno, Phil, Puffy, and Niki were the main people to clear the buildings.

By sunset, they’d discovered exactly 8 survivors. Five had been hidden away in various buildings and 3 had noticed what was happening and had come out themselves. They’d also found a cat that Techno managed to coax down from a tree. All of them had been dirty and more than half starved. They were evacuated outside the city.

The team of four decided on clearing one more building before calling it a night since they didn’t want to be securing buildings in the dark. The last building appeared to have been a restaurant of some sort. It still had its doors intact, which was good in some ways as they wouldn’t need to put in as much work to seal it up. However, that likely meant anyone who’d been turned in the restaurant was still in there.

They were practiced at this point in clearing buildings. It was Phil and Techno’s turn to go in first, leaving Puffy and Niki to take up the rear. Phil started by knocking on the door. They waited for a few moments, but when nothing came stumbling into sight, Phil cautiously opened the door.

There was still nothing as they moved into the room. Techno walked forward to close the door to the kitchen tight so they could focus on clearing the dining area first.

They all started when they heard sudden movement. Niki was the closest and she pointed her gun in the direction the sound had come from. There was a groan and she moved closer, cautiously, Puffy at her heels.

She paused, looking down at something Techno couldn’t see from his spot by the kitchen. “What the fuck?” she asked.

Phil and Techno stepped forward immediately to see. There was a body sprawled across the ground, but it was no corpse dead or undead. He was surrounded by empty liquor bottles and was using a dirty green jacket as a pillow.

“Schlatt,” Puffy said.

The man stirred at the sound of his name, his eyes blinking open. “Who’s e’it?” he slurred. He moved his hand and it smacked against an empty bottle of vodka. He picked it up, realized it was empty and let it clink to the ground again all without moving his head. “Fuck.”

They were all stunned into silence for a moment at the sight of one of the heads of the city, the man who’d made all of the zombies and skeletons they’d fought off today.

“What are you doing here?” Puffy finally asked.

“Gettin’ drunk,” was the answer. His eyes were glassy, and Techno thought he probably didn’t even know where he was.

“Well, we can certainly see that,” Niki noted, her nose scrunched up. She kicked at one of the empty bottles.

“Why?” Puffy asked, sounding confused.

“M’ powers don’ work when ’m drunk.”

“And you don’t want them to work?” Phil asked, tilting his head.

Schlatt shook his head. “She’s crazy,” he muttered. “Can’t make me use them if I don’t have them.”

“She?” Phil asked, “the mayor?”

“Mmm,” Schlatt said. Techno thought that was a confirmation. “We made a deal. If I made her a zombie army, I got to fuck with the heroes.”

Techno saw Phil’s face harden slightly. Schlatt probably wouldn’t have had enough braincells to process the expression even if he’d been looking.

“So, you did want to make them, then,” Techno said.

Schlatt’s eyes flickered to Techno. “Yeah, I wanted to,” Schlatt admitted. “Fuck all the surface dwellers, especially the heroes. I don’t give a fuck about any of them. Or well... I thought...” He seemed to sober up slightly at those words.

“What changed?” Phil asked.

Schlatt looked up at him and a slow sardonic smile grew across his face. “I’m a bastard,” he said, and then his face fell with a shudder, “but even *bastards* got lines.”

Schlatt moved then, stumbling to his feet with a glass bottle in hand. Niki cocked her gun, but all he did was waver on his feet.

“I need more booze,” he said. He tossed the bottle at his feet, and it shattered into a million pieces. Techno thought he certainly did not need any more, especially when he took a step forward. His shoes were clearly set off to the side and his feet immediately started bleeding all over the floor.

“I think you don’t actually,” Phil commented, echoing Techno’s thoughts.

“I can’t control them,” Schlatt snapped, sounding frustrated, “but she *can*.”

“Have you considered a power suppressant?” Phil asked.

Schlatt blinked at him like the question had just been spoken in Latin. “A fucking what?”

Phil frowned. He turned to Puffy. “You don’t possibly...?”

She almost instantly tossed him a pair of cuffs. Phil stepped forward, and Schlatt didn’t do anything except for sway dangerously on his feet. Phil grabbed him and handcuffed him behind his back.

“You won’t be able to use your powers with those,” Phil said after stepping back.

Schlatt blinked at him for a long moment and then crashed headfirst into the floor.

“Well,” Niki said, “What the hell are we going to do with him?”

Chapter End Notes

Techno's qualification for being his friend:

1. Gives him food.
2. Will train with him. (This can be fighting training but also includes things like training him to ride a horse.)
3. Is willing to shoot him in the head without hesitation. (Phil is exempt from this qualification.)

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Is there anything else you can tell us?” Phil asked.

“You’ve all drained my brain dryer than those skeletons were before I reanimated them,” Schlatt said with a scoff. He was flipping idly through a magazine but didn’t seem to actually be reading it. He was reclined on a bed made out of straw, his posture looking more like a disgruntled teenager than a necromancer responsible for all of the zombies in the city.

They’d given him a room that wasn’t quite a cell, but also wasn’t quite not a cell. He could leave with supervision, but he didn’t often use that option even now that he was partially back on his feet.

“It doesn’t hurt to ask,” said Phil. He was leaning up against the door. It had once been a tack room from what Phil understood, and still smelled vaguely of horse and leather. “Especially now that you aren’t in withdrawal.”

They’d dragged Schlatt back to Kurtis’s farm mostly dead. It wasn’t just alcohol that he was on, he’d also managed to fuck himself up with his powers and was in withdrawal from that as well.

Schlatt’s powers were odd. There were few necromancers on record and even fewer that had been studied. No one quite knew how his powers worked, least of all the man himself. He might even function completely differently than other necromancers.

When they’d gotten him back, his blood had been a cocktail of different catecholamines which had been barely starving off alcohol poisoning when they’d found him. They’d had to remove the suppressant cuffs a few times to stop him from going into cardiac arrest. At the same time, they hadn’t wanted to leave them off for too long as whatever his powers were doing to his body wasn’t good for it either.

It took weeks of careful monitoring to keep him stable before he’d recovered enough to talk. He’d spilled everything he’d remembered, though after doing his best to kill all of his braincells with alcohol, Phil wouldn’t be surprised if he was forgetting some things.

Now he was no longer throwing up every meal and could sit up without being short of breath. He’d given more and more information as he’d recovered fully with no resistance or restraint.

“If I had remembered anything else for you, I’d have told the guards to get you,” Schlatt said.

“Even a little thing could help,” Phil said.

Schlatt just shook his head and coughed with a wince. “I’ve given you all of the little things.”

“I’m starting to fear we’ll soon begin seeing retaliation from the heroes,” Phil continued. “There’s been an increase in VAND alerts. I don’t think our takeover of zone 10 went unnoticed, and we still can’t figure out the extent of Werner’s powers. We just know it’s some kind of mind control.”

“I don’t think it’s mind control,” Schlatt said.

That was news to Phil. “You don’t?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “It’s more like...,” he paused to think, “convincing.”

“Convincing?”

“Like, manipulation,” Schlatt said. “She’s not controlling you. She’s making you want to do what she says, and if you try not to...” he trailed off again, eyebrows knitting together. “She has something.”

“What?”

“She has something of mine,” Schlatt said. “It’s like she’s holding my still beating heart over the lip of an active volcano. I don’t. She has something. I can’t remember what, but I feel desperate not to let her drop it. Maybe it is mind control.”

“Most heroes are trained against mind control,” Phil said, “and many of them are affected by this, so it must be something different.” Phil felt himself frown. “If we don’t know what it is though, we can’t fight against it.”

Schlatt considered him. “She said she deals in wishes,” he said. It was not the first time he’d said so. “Sometimes she’d offer to give me a dream of something I wanted for a little while, but I always refused. I think that’s what she does to Bad all the time. He’s walking in a dream. She still did *something* to me though. She finds something you want in your soul, and she gives it to you. She’d give you your heart’s desire, but it’s always for a price. It’s never what you actually wanted in the end.”

He looked back down at his magazine, flipping through a few more pages.

“The only advice I can give you is, if you face her, don’t wish for anything.”

~ ~ ~

“We could just kill him,” Techno said, his tone befitting that of a toddler who didn’t get the right flavored ice cream more than a fully grown man suggesting an execution.

Techno did not like Schlatt. He’d been very vocal about his opinion on the man. Luckily, he usually kept the more murdery suggestions to himself or said them only to Phil.

“We’re not killing Schlatt,” Phil said firmly.

“He made those things,” Techno pointed out.

“And the fact that the city is still falling apart even after we captured him, underlines the fact that if it wasn’t his powers, it would have been someone else’s. Puffy also worked for the mayor, technically for longer than Schlatt, and you don’t have a problem with her.”

“It’s different,” Techno claimed.

“It’s not our job to judge someone’s culpability in mass murder when there are extenuating circumstances,” Phil said, glancing at him.

“Whose job is it then?” Techno asked with a scowl.

“Ask me again at the end of this war,” Phil said. “He’s more useful alive from a tactical standpoint anyway. The man doesn’t have use of his powers and can barely get out of bed with his health.”

Technoblade grunted, apparently accepting this logic for now, though Phil didn't anticipate this would be the end of it. "Did he say anything useful?"

"Nothing new," Phil replied. They exited the barn. It was Kurtis's nearest neighbor's barn. She'd been willing to let them use her property when they'd had to recently expand their base. Luckily, most of Kurtis's neighbors had also been gearing up for disaster, so it was almost as defendable as Kurtis's property.

The second they were outside the building, there was a clomp of hoofs. Phil rolled his eyes, but he'd long stopped pointedly asking if the horse should be locked in a stall or tied up.

Carl trotted up next to Techno, falling into step beside them like he was the third participant of their conversation.

"Is there anything else that needs to be done?" Phil asked.

"No," Techno replied, reaching up to idly pet Carl as they walked. "I think we've done everything."

There were campfires dotted along the landscape, seeming to glow even brighter every moment as the sky grew darker. It was almost the end of November and while they hadn't yet had their first snow, the cold was biting during the night. Most people packed into one of the available houses (or occasionally barns) to sleep, but they spent most of their time outside when they could.

Despite the clear signs of life not too far away, Phil felt like he and Techno were truly alone for the first time in a long time.

The cold was biting, but they both had warm coats and were used to the cold, so Phil didn't complain when Technoblade stopped for a moment on their trek back to Kurtis's house.

"There're a lot of stars tonight," Techno commented.

Phil looked up and found that he was right. "Yeah," he agreed. "It's a clear night."

"You know, I thought they were some sort of lightbulb at first," Techno divulged, "and that someone switched them on and off every night."

"You did?"

"I'd never seen the sky," he said with a shrug, head still titled back. "You can see Andromeda."

"You can," Phil said, finding it easily with his eyes. He remembered exactly where it was. He'd shown Techno the constellation himself that first winter. "You know, most of these people," he nodded in the direction of the firelight, "probably lived all their lives in the city. Maybe during our next downtime, we can tell a few stories to the ones that don't know anything about stars."

"That would be nice," Techno said. His hand was on Carl's muzzle as he looked at the stars for a few more moments. Then, he turned to Phil. "We should head back," he said. He swung up onto Carl's back with very little fanfare. "Race you back."

"What? Hey!" Phil yelled at the retreating horse. "Not fair! I'm wearing a coat!"

He couldn't tell because the wind had picked up and he was already pretty far away, but Phil thought he could hear Techno laughing.

~ ~ ~

Zone 8 was their biggest venture yet. They'd had a few different choices of where to go after clearing zones 10 and 11. Zone 9 was a smaller zone, but it had been damaged by the flood that had wiped zone 12 off the map. It would likely have few survivors.

Zone 17 bordered zone 11, but it was one of the largest zones and would be difficult to manage even with their increase in people working with them. Plus, it was one of the farthest zones from the city center and so likely had less aid at the beginning and less of a chance for survivors.

Both zones 5 and 8 bordered zone 10. They were roughly the same size, and both bordered the city center. They were more likely to have survivors than the outer districts, especially because Phil knew for a fact there had been a good number of survivors before the skeletons.

Both put their group in range of downtown.

Zone 5 shared a border with zone 3 exclusively whereas zone 8 shared a border with both zones 2 and 3. The mayor's office was located in zone 1 and taking zone 8 would put them very close to it.

They had decided it was time to take the risk and put themselves in a position where they would be a bigger target but would also be that much closer to being able to invade zone 1.

Besides, Phil had a feeling they were going to be a target soon no matter what path they took.

They were bringing an army into the city. It was a humanitarian operation, but Phil thought that just might make the heroes even more angry. It would be war sooner or later, and Phil had a sinking feeling it might be sooner as he surveyed the remnants of zone 10.

It had been completely cleared out by them at this point, but the group was still on guard. It was almost creepier to walk through the abandoned city streets without a horde of zombies attempting to eat your face.

They'd tripled reinforced the wall that separated zone 10 and zone 8 themselves and it seemed to have held as they walked up to it. Phil glanced one last time at Techno who gave him a nod. Phil nodded back and flew to the top of the wall.

Phil looked down into zone 8. Its streets were recognizable to him even partially destroyed.

He turned to let the ramps and ladders they'd stored there previously down. Puffy, who had also flown up to the top of the wall, helped him do so.

Techno and Niki were first as always on Carl's back, music blaring from a boom box. As they started off, the rainclouds rolled in, and all of their volunteers went after them, there to pick off any zombies they found distracted by all the noise.

Phil flew up, leaving Puffy at the wall. It was his job to make sure every boarder wall around zone 8 was secure.

With his vantage point, he was likely the first to realize something was wrong. There were strangely fewer zombies than expected going after Techno and Niki. Yet, before he could figure out what to think about that, the city alarms started going off.

Phil cursed, knowing the alarm codes much better than a regular citizen. Those alarms with that pattern spelled out that there was an active villain attack in zone 8 and all hands needed to be on deck.

He yelled a warning to the people below, but he doubted he could be heard above the noise. Luckily, by the way Techno had pulled up on the reins, he knew what was happening too.

They'd discussed the plan for this inevitability. Techno and the others would know what to do, would know the strategies and formations to fight off most of the heroes Schlatt and Puffy had reported as alive and active.

Phil's priority in this situation was one thing, or more specifically, one person. Everyone knew Phil was the only person who could go up against Bad and have a good chance of walking away. So, Phil turned to face the direction of zone 1 and waited in the sky.

~ ~ ~

Lightning almost struck Phil and Bad as they went careening into an apartment building near the border of zone 2. At least, Phil thought as his head slammed through an old refrigerator, he knew Puffy was still alive.

The apartment's former (now zombified) occupant wheeled and lunged as soon as it realized a meal had just been airdropped into its kitchen. If the thing had been locked in here the whole time, it was probably starving. Phil wrenched his head out of the fridge, pivoted, and slammed his foot through its skull. Then, he grabbed at Bad and threw him back into the sky.

Bad looked to be in worse shape than he'd been in the last time they'd fought, Phil noted during the lulls in their fight. The dark inkiness that typically covered his skin seemed to pulse dangerously, and he glowed a faint red all over.

There was agonized screaming from below, but whose and what side they were on was impossible to tell.

"People are dying, Bad," Phil spat out some of his own blood. "*You* are killing them."

There was no response. There hadn't been a response for the entire fight. Bad didn't even seem to hear him.

Phil dodged out of the way as Bad lunged.

"Puffy said," Phil said, and then cut himself off as Bad went for his neck. "Look, I don't know who he was or who he was to you, but do you really think *this* is the answer?"

Bad pulsed red again and Phil felt tearing at his mind's defenses, but it was easier to brush off now than it ever had been.

"Stop that!"

Bad lunged again and this time Phil didn't react quick enough. They went flying off into the sky, this time without any tall buildings to stop their momentum.

Phil managed to slow himself, kicking Bad off even as claws left deep gouges on his face, and slowing his speed with his wings.

"You're being used, Bad," Phil said, wiping blood and rainwater out of his eyes. "You know you're being used!"

Bad also managed to recover himself from their uncontrolled flight. He turned to Phil, eyes not even seeming to land on him. His mouth opened then for the first time during their fight, but what came out wasn't a voice. It was distorted; it didn't even sound human. "The world is mine," he boomed. "It belongs to me."

"...What?"

"The world is mine. It belongs to me."

And there was a tug of something different in Phil's head. A flash of brown curls and a child's face.

Don't wish for anything.

Phil punched Bad in the face, and he fell out of the sky like a rock. He crashed into the ground so hard he probably left a crater. Unlike all of the times before, he didn't get up.

Phil stared down at him in surprise. He'd hit him hard, but Bad was more than resilient enough to handle that. He flinched when he saw an opportunistic zombie jump on the man.

Before he could decide what to do, a voice yanked Phil's attention away from the man being eaten on the ground.

"You know," the calm, almost curious voice said, "you've been a bit annoying."

Phil whipped around in the air to face the speaker, unsure how she'd even gotten there so fast when he knew she hadn't been there a moment before.

Mayor Werner wasn't even looking at him. Her face was turned away looking down at the events happening in the city below.

Phil had not expected her here in the middle of a fight even though he knew she was the person behind it all. She'd been a politician. He'd never seen her fight anyone before. Phil hadn't even known she could fly but here she was high above the ground.

"I could have had this city months ago if it weren't for you," she commented casually. As Phil watched, wisps of black ink began to spin around her. Bad's powers, Phil thought, leery. "It's strange," she said, and she finally looked up at him, though Phil wasn't sure if he should say she *looked* at him. Her pupils were gone, leaving just the whites of her eyes glowing faintly red as she pulled Bad's powers to her before changing to green.

Though she used the same voice he was used to from the television screen, her mouth didn't open when she next spoke.

"When I first was looking at threats to my reign, I labeled you as inconsequential, potentially even as someone who'd easily join my ranks. Something's changed about you since then." Her face didn't change or emote at all. "Odd. I'm not used to being surprised."

Phil stared at her, mind racing as he tried to figure out what was happening. "What are you?" he asked.

Then she smiled, a huge, genuine smile that lit up her whole face and crinkled the skin around her eyes.

"I'm god," she said.

Then, faster than Phil could track (superspeed?), and with Bad's strength behind it, she reached out with black ink covered, green and red glowing hands to snap his neck.

The End

Unless...

Chapter End Notes

No... please don't look at all the things the Egg said on the DSMP... Don't do that and make a bunch of theories about every character we've seen in this verse who talked to the egg in cannon. That would just be a waste of all of our times... Haha... unless...

And also don't click on this because I totally wasn't worried about spoilers if I just embedded the video there at the end. ;P.

And...

Chapter Summary

Thank you to SamTheShrimp, CocoBean, and Crow for betaing this for me!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A hand reached out through the blurry fog that was the rest of the world, the only thing Technoblade could bring into focus because he knew it was where death laid in wait. Yet, what actually laid in the palm didn't look like death. It was small bits of color.

Another hand came out and grabbed one of the colorful bits, placing it into a mouth.

"Here," the opponent said, and the hand moved even closer, still open palmed and holding the other little bits of color. "Have one."

It had been a demonstration, Technoblade realized. Cautiously, he reached out and took one of the bits of red. He put it in his own mouth. It was oddly smooth on his tongue and honestly didn't feel like food, but he carefully bit down anyway, and it snapped apart easily against his teeth. There was a burst of flavor he'd never experienced before, and it was good.

More of the bits were offered to him.

Technoblade did not understand.

~ ~ ~

"Want to try?" A small device was placed into Technoblade's hands. It had a screen like the scoreboard above the normal fighting area. Was this a different type of scoreboard? A tiny one? He looked at Phil.

"You just..." The man moved, and Technoblade didn't flinch. Phil was not killing him; Phil was showing him. He put a finger on the scoreboard and gently moved it. The screen responded, making the boxes with numbers hit each other and become a single box with a bigger number.

Curious, Technoblade repeated the action and the numbered tiles moved again. Then again and again.

"You can do other directions," Phil said, reaching over again to show him all the different ways he could make the screen move.

It did not take Technoblade many tries to realize the objective of the scoreboard. It was a scoreboard after all. He made the numbers get bigger.

"You won," Phil said when little bits of color suddenly sparked on the screen. "Good job."

He had won? How had he won? There was no blood on his hands. Were scores with Phil different?

Technoblade did not understand.

~ ~ ~

Technoblade sat on the ground. He was tired, but he was alive. Phil stood above him. He was looking at Technoblade and he looked agitated. If he were anyone else, Technoblade would be wary of the vulnerable position. Yet, he had already thrown himself at Phil's feet once today and it had bought him nothing but protection. He had nothing to fear.

Phil was mumbling more to himself than to Technoblade, but Technoblade still idly tuned in.

“Would you kill me right now if I took that off?”

Technoblade was so surprised by the question that he forgot himself. “Why would I kill you?” he asked out loud instead of just in his own head.

Phil's head whipped around to stare at him. “You can talk?”

Was Phil not aware Technoblade could talk? Most people knew he could talk. They just didn't want him to.

But Phil apparently did want him to talk. He even explained the words so Technoblade could answer his questions.

“You're pretty confused, huh?”

Yes.

Technoblade did not understand.

~ ~ ~

Technoblade had gotten used to Phil's hands in his hair over the course of the washing and the drying and the brushing. He thought he might even like it. Even when Phil's treatment caused a sting it was clear by the way he moved that his intentions were gentle.

The last time someone had treated his hair, there had not been a negotiation and there had certainly not been gentleness.

That time had ended with bruises on his neck. This time Phil was careful to avoid his ears after he'd flinched away from him touching them once, and the only thing he felt on the back of his neck was his own hair occasionally brushing against it.

That time had ended with multiple nicks to the top of his head, a few of which had bled for hours afterwards. This time Phil carefully pulled apart the clumped-up strands and every time there was a quick flash of pain, it only lasted for a moment.

That time he'd had no hair at the end. This time, he had a thick braid down his back, the weight of it strange but not unpleasant.

“There,” Phil said with finality in his voice, and Technoblade almost felt disappointed that he was pulling away. “You have earned your freedom.”

He couldn't help but reach up to touch the braid with reverent fingers. He looked up at Phil who was smiling at him knowingly. Technoblade couldn't help but feel a resurgence of rebellious emotions at the sight of his smugness.

"I am not saying thank you."

This time, Phil just laughed.

And Techno... wanted to understand.

~ ~ ~

"It's about memory I think," Phil answered. "If you look closely, you'll see that some things have changed between when that photo was taken and now. They have a new sign, and I'm pretty sure the store next door is a different one than what's there now."

"But I still don't know why they'd want to hang the picture in their restaurant. They were the ones who changed the sign. Why would they care that a different business shut down?"

"They like the reminder of how things have changed, I expect," Phil said. "Memories are..." he trailed off, staring into space, suddenly lost to Techno for a moment before he was back, looking at Techno with serious eyes. "Memories are important. Sometimes to find the path forward, you have to look back."

"But why?"

"We are memories," Phil said, "our own and other people's."

"Did you actually say that last bit?" Technoblade asked. "Would you have said that yet?"

"Maybe not yet," Phil said with a smile.

Techno would understand much later.

~ ~ ~

"You hid an injury from me," Phil said. His face was drawn and almost haunted. "I must have done something wrong."

"It was inconsequential," Techno replied. He had been dying and he had hated it, but it wouldn't matter in the end. He thought it might be better than this.

He wasn't supposed to eat the peaches; this had been his punishment. If he would have died, he would have earned it. If not, the pain and the anxiety would have been enough. Phil was not supposed to know. Technoblade did not know how to deal with the fact that he did. He'd honestly not expected Phil to care about the hurt when he'd heard the reason, but clearly, he did. He seemed angrier that Techno hadn't told him than he did about the peaches and the rule Techno had broken.

"It wasn't actually," Phil said, his voice surprisingly harsh. "How often have you done this? How often have you been hurt, and I haven't even known?"

Many times, Techno thought, but he wisely didn't say.

"Fuck," Phil said under this breath.

Techno kept his gaze mostly on his hot chocolate but peeked at Phil out of the corner of his eyes. He looked upset, but Techno was starting to think it wasn't about the peaches. Phil had always been gentle. His hands had never hurt Techno.

Did he... feel the same way about Techno's own hands doing the hurting?

Techno flexed his hand. The cut stung a bit especially with the medicine that had so carefully been put on it.

He would... not to like see Phil hurt even if Techno himself did not do the hurting.

Techno thought he might understand.

~ ~ ~

'You didn't kill me,' Technoblade completed the thought in his head. He had always known it. Phil had not killed him. Yet, the weight of that fact had never been so heavy as it was now. Now Techno knew.

Phil had not killed him.

He should have. From his perspective, he should have.

He had not.

Among all of those people from the civilians to the police officers to the heroes, he had been the only one who had not.

And he had continued to not even when he didn't understand.

Techno could see the way the realization settled over Phil slowly. The truth seemed to fill up his eyes and his hand shook just slightly where it hovered in the air over the slice of cake.

"You asked me when we first came here if I would try to kill you. I was surprised. I didn't understand why you would think I'd kill you, but I think I get it now."

Technoblade understood.

~ ~ ~

"I used to teach Wilbur archery," Phil noted as they were packing up the bow and arrow for the day. He still stumbled over the name any time he said it.

"You did?" Techno asked.

"Well, we used rubber tipped arrows," Phil said with a small smile, his eyes distant. It was a different type of smile, one that he got only when he spoke of his son, sad around the edges, but in a way that only could have been derived from a once great happiness. "He was 8, but... he was pretty accurate for an 8-year-old."

"It must be genetic," Technoblade said.

Phil laughed lightly. "Maybe it was," he said. "Or maybe it was just that I started him at 4. It's easy to be an expert if you spent half your life doing something..." Phil trailed off, the smile dropping from his face.

Technoblade wanted to say something to erase the suddenly stricken look on his face.

But Technoblade did not understand. Yet.

~ ~ ~

The VAND alerts continued through the night. Phil would not put the phone down, staring at it blankly.

Technoblade had never particularly cared about the city. The only memories he had in it were of fear and confusion until Phil had taken him back to it years later for things like the museum. Even then, the good memories were more of Phil than the city itself.

Yet, Phil had good memories of it. He spoke of children's museums and ice cream parlors and little duck ponds sometimes. That city was full of memories. It was full of memories of Phil's son. And it was dying.

Plus, Phil was a hero. Technoblade knew this deep in his bones. Technoblade knew it like he knew the sting of a knife, a sting that had never come from Phil. Phil was a hero.

Technoblade couldn't say he understood that, but he did understand Phil.

~ ~ ~

"Are you a hero?" Techno heard the woman in the house ask.

Yes, thought Techno.

"Not exactly," replied Phil. "Not anymore."

Technoblade wondered what it meant to be a hero then. He glanced up to see that a gaunt looking man was approaching Technoblade and the bags he stood by.

"There are meal kits and water. There are seed kits inside the meal kits," Technoblade told him, practiced at this by now.

The man looked dubiously at what Technoblade handed him. "There's more in there than it looks like," Techno said. "They rehydrate."

"Thanks," the man said swiftly, and skuttled off back towards his house.

Phil continued to go to the doors and Technoblade handed out things to people who came out.

When Phil flew up to try to talk to the current Head of the Guild and ended up punching him in the face, Technoblade was pretty sure Phil was wrong about not being a hero.

When Bad finally crashed to the ground, defeated, Technoblade had already known for a long time.

Technoblade probably understood the concept more than Phil.

~ ~ ~

"It wasn't a bad one," Technoblade lied almost desperately, a churning in his gut. He remembered the peaches and the way that Phil had looked at him stricken for a week, and the lies rose up unbidden. "Very quick," he said. The only thing keeping him from hyperventilating was the fact that he could

hyperventilate. "I barely noticed." He could still feel the sensation of opening his mouth and... "and it was only the one."

"Are you lying to me?" Phil asked.

"I swear it was only the one," Techno replied, and that, at least, was true. It had only been the one.

"It still matters to me," Phil said, and still Techno had it in him to be surprised, because Techno was okay. He didn't have an infected cut. His hair was barely even matted. "I don't care how quick or painless it was. I always want to know."

Phil cared that he'd died, and that probably shouldn't have been surprising, but it was. The only person who had ever cared when Techno died before was Techno.

Phil cared that Technoblade died.

Technoblade understood that the opposite was true too.

~ ~ ~

"Hey, Phil," Niki said, hiding a smile. "Want to play some poker?" Niki had decided to teach Techno the rules of poker and when Techno had started to consistently beat her, had hatched a plan that promised to get Techno out of washing dishes for weeks. "I explained the rules to Techno earlier and we've been having fun betting household chores."

Phil agreed easily and highly regretted it within the hour.

He was fuming by the third game he lost, but Techno knew Phil could be having fun even when he acted angry. By the twitch of his lips, Techno could tell this was one of those times. He wasn't really mad. He was actually pretty amused.

"I wish we had more time for this sort of thing," Phil commented as he was dealt another hand.

"You didn't say that."

"Did I not?" Phil asked bemused. "I just don't understand how you keep winning," he continued, more to himself than to Techno as he looked at his hand.

Techno however did understand how he kept winning; he was the only one who knew what all the cards were.

~ ~ ~

The world froze when Phil fell. The chaos in the city, the screams and groans and barked orders all faded into nothingness, and he was once again 14. Again, the world was a blur except for Phil, the man Technoblade had always known to be one with the sky, as he fell from it.

Technoblade knew death very well.

Technoblade had never known grief.

"I have never had someone to grief that I can remember," he remembered telling Phil when Phil had been crumpled in front of a gravestone, wracked with something that Technoblade could not properly comprehend. He did not understand then.

It had always been Technoblade that died.

Phil's body made a horribly loud sound as it hit the ground.

"I think," the Technoblade of his memory said, *"if you were to die the way that normal people die, it would tear me apart in a way worse than how anyone who has ever killed me has."*

He understood now.

Technoblade was somehow by his side, blocks away without having realized he'd moved.

Phil was certainly dead.

Technoblade knew death.

And he was dead.

His body was at the wrong angle, one wing out and one broken underneath his corpse, not that he could feel it. There was blood on his face and dripping out of his mouth. His neck was twisted so badly it looked like his head might pop clean off.

Technoblade fell to his knees next to him and put a hand on his still chest.

Attempts at CPR wouldn't help this. Techno knew that.

Phil was dead.

But he shouldn't be.

He couldn't be.

Phil did not deserve to die.

Phil did not deserve this.

Phil deserved to be alive.

Phil deserved to be alive, and okay, and *happy*.

And for the first time in Technoblade's existence, he reached out for his powers and *pulled*.

Chapter End Notes

Technoblade and Phil will return 14 years earlier in *Two Steps Back*.

End Notes

We have fanart for Techno's outfit in Chapter 13 [One](#)
[Two](#)

In recent news about Technoblade, I made a statement regarding if this and my other fics will be continued [here](#). The short answer is yes.

Works inspired by this one

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